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Ex Humano Templo Loquitur:

The Eloquent God and Holy Scripture in the Theology of John Webster

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This thesis is entirely original research and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Pages 88–100 appear in modified form in "Making Space for Politics: the Gift of Public Theology in the Work of John Webster," *International Journal of Public Theology* 13, no. 3 (2019), 301–20 (currently in press). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. Where other published translations are available for comparison, references have been supplied.

13.3.20

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Abstract

This thesis explores John Webster's doctrine of Scripture in context. The contexts considered relate, first, to Webster himself in his personal, ecclesial, and institutional settings. Second, Webster's theological project is approached in the setting of the western theological academy, and is characterised as a response to the perceived problems of *modernity* by means of a retrieval of *premodern* theological resources, articulated in and for a *postmodern* context. Third, Webster's doctrine of Scripture is situated in the context of his theological architectonics, with special attention payed to his articulation of the relationship between God and creatures, and the idea of revelation. These issues are treated diachronically, with a particular focus on the shift from a basically Barthian paradigm, to one significantly influenced by Aquinas and other scholastic theologians. An heuristic distinction between an "earlier" and a "later" Webster is introduced and defended as a hermeneutical key to appreciating the changes in his constructive work.

To summarise the findings of the first four chapters, John Webster's doctrine of Scripture is a (theo)logical development from his theology proper, his wider concept of the God-world relation, and in particular his understanding of the interplay between divine and human agencies in the work of creating, saving, and perfecting creatures in the economy of grace. Together, these elements form the architectonic theological structure within which Webster's doctrine of Scripture takes both its form and its material content. At the heart of this structure, it will be argued, is the Trinitarian concept of "revelation," which for Webster is shorthand for the saving presence of the eternal God to human creatures in the temporal/historical missions of the Son and the Spirit. Considered absolutely, this divine, saving presence is the immediate self-presentation of God in his turn to creatures, communicated to creatures by a work of divine grace. It cannot therefore be equated with Holy Scripture. Scripture is, then, the divinely appointed, human-but-holy,

ultimate, and instrumental *witness* to revelation, by means of which "accommodated" instrument God executes his rule over the church (proximately) and the world (ultimately). Webster's doctrine of Scripture therefore does not stand or fall in isolation: it may only be truly understood, appreciated, and evaluated, as part of a greater whole.

The central critical question arising from Webster's bibliology is: *What is the relationship between the divine Word and the human words of Scripture*? In the last two chapters, a further, more critical, thesis will be articulated in respect of this question, namely that Webster's doctrine of Scripture suffers from the lack of a truly Trinitarian, organic, and analogical understanding of the relationship between divine and human "speech," and a viable concept of general revelation. Acknowledging the validity of some recent criticisms of Webster's work, a range of sources from the Reformed tradition will be brought to bear, in an attempt to reframe these aspects of his doctrine and overcome more successfully the dualisms that Webster himself opposed.

Lay Summary

British Anglican theologian John Webster (1955-2016) made one of the most significant recent contributions to the doctrine of Scripture. In some of his later essays he cited St Augustine: *God speaks from his human temple* (which citation suggests the Latin title of the present work). This thesis engages some of the important theological issues arising from Webster's bibliology, not least the question of the relationship between the eloquent God and the human words of Holy Scripture. Behind this question lie some fundamental theological problems, such as the nature of the relationship between God and creation, and the question of how human beings can know, and speak about, God.

John Webster's doctrine of Scripture is therefore presented in its various contexts, to explain it, defend it against some of its critics, and subject it to some constructively-framed criticisms. The central thesis argued is that, for Webster, God's revelation is *immediate*, because of its relationship to the divine essence. But, equally, given its creaturely term, revelation is *mediated*. Holy Scripture is therefore the creaturely, accommodated form of that revelation, which is never to be simply identified with the divine presence or the divine Word. There are great theological gains from such a construal, as divine act and being are brought to bear upon an account of Scripture. Yet it is suggested that Webster's understanding of language – and in particular what it might mean for God to "speak" – means he cannot overcome a residual dualism between the divine and human aspects of his account of Scripture. In conversation with a range of interlocutors, mostly from Webster's own Reformed tradition, it is argued that his understanding of God and God's self-communication might be nuanced by employing some different categories, such as general revelation, an internal/external distinction in ectypal theology, and an organic view of the relationship between God, God's Word/words, and God's world.

Acknowledgments

A Ph.D. thesis such as this one might formally be the work of only one person: in reality it could never have been finished without the help of many others. Most important of these "helpers" are my wife Yuko, and our children Kaz and Isla. Thanks to you three! Returning to live in "Auld Reekie" for the first time in twenty years has been an unexpected joy. It has been good to live nearer to my parents than we have for some time, and friends at Chalmers Church here in Edinburgh have blessed us in many ways, practically and spiritually.

This thesis was undertaken primarily in order that, after graduation, I might serve the churches of Japan through theological education. It is submitted in the hope that it might be useful to that end, as well as for what I trust is its own worth as a piece of original research. My course fees were paid by St Ebbe's Church, Oxford, our "home" church, and the most encouraging and supportive of church families, as part of which we were privileged to serve, learn, and grow for five years. I am grateful also for the financial support of many other friends and partners in Oxford and around the world who have given generously to enable this thesis to be written.

My particular thanks to those who have advised and encouraged me in different ways during the course of this project, especially my academic supervisor Dr James Eglinton and secondary supervisor Professor David Fergusson (at New College in the University of Edinburgh), and Mr Selvan Anketell (Director of Mission at *Japan Christian Link*).

I never met the late John Webster in person, but I am deeply grateful for all that I have learned from him about the joyful task of dogmatics, and about the God of whom we, falteringly but faithfully, are enabled to speak. Six months before he died, Webster kindly agreed to read two of my Th.M. essays, at a stage when I barely recognised how distinguished he was in the world of systematic theology. Later, Webster wrote to me that he had read my work "with profit and admiration." I have

opened and re-opened that email many times over the last few years, often when struggling to understand or express some knotty aspect of my research, usually just for a bit of encouragement. What humility and kindness, from a theological luminary directed to a mere amateur! In truth, all the profit and admiration throughout our association with one another's writing has been on my side.

Lastly, and most importantly, I thank the Triune God for revealing himself to me in nature and in grace: for life, and breath, and everything else, above all for the gifts of his Son and his Spirit.

List of Abbreviations

BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed.
CD	Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*.

Volumes of collected essays by John Webster are frequently cited by abbreviated titles in this thesis: these abbreviations are given in the footnotes referencing the first citation of each work, but are also listed here for readers' convenience.

CG	*Confessing God*
W&C	*Word and Church*
DoW	*The Domain of the Word*
GWM	*God Without Measure* (volumes 1 & 2)

For Yuko

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Introduction

> *What Scripture is, and how it is to be read, cannot ultimately be separated from still larger questions, questions about our very way of thinking about God, and about ourselves in relation to Him.*[1]
>
> *For me it would be a canon of all research in theological history, and perhaps in all history, that one should try to present what has engaged another person, whether in a good way or a less good, as something living, as something that moved him in some way and that can and indeed does move oneself too; to unfold it in such a way that even if one finally takes some other route, the path of this other has an enticing, or, if you like, tempting attraction for oneself. Disregard of this canon, I think, can only avenge itself by rendering the attempted historical research unprofitable and tedious.*[2]

This thesis is about John Webster's doctrine of the eloquent God and Holy Scripture.[3] It addresses questions about how the eternal God communicates himself to finite creatures, and the place of Scripture in that communication.

What follows is an exercise, on the one hand, in *appreciative, near-historical theology*. As Webster's work is described and analysed, the argument will be, first, that his doctrine of Scripture – and indeed his entire theological project – is, in Barth's words, a "tempting attraction" to a certain species of theologian. It is such, certainly, for theologians who wish to speak of the sovereign, saving work of the Triune God in the economy of his grace, overflowing from the perfections of his inner life, and who try to account for the human phenomenon that is Scripture

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1. James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*, First Free Press trade paperback ed. (New York: Free Press, 2008), 46. Italicised.

2. Karl Barth, *Letters, 1961–1968*, trans. Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Sotevesandt (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), Letter 239. Cited in John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5. Italicised.

3. Webster's own practice of capitalising "Holy Scripture" is followed here. Reference to God's "Human Temple" in the title is from the preface to Augustine's *De Doctrina*. It was a favourite citation of John Webster in some of his later works, and its significance will be considered later in this thesis.

within that domain, even as they sit humbly under Scripture's tutelage. The reader of this thesis will find that its author has been engaged, moved, and enticed by Webster's compelling and single-minded approach to dogmatics, and convinced by not a few of his conclusions along the way. At points, some of Webster's insights will be further developed, and on occasion a scholarly defence of Webster against some of his detractors will be offered.

On the other hand, this thesis is an exercise in *critical theological analysis*. The argument, therefore, will be that Webster's work sometimes stands in need of nuance, modification, or correction. John Webster himself would have expected nothing less, for he was self-consciously engaged in theology that was open to challenge and amendment. In what was only his second published work, Webster concluded that "theology is *nothing if not a repentant science*. Part of repentance is changing one's mind. And if through studying the thought of others we are jolted out of false habits of thought into a fresh grappling with the truth of the faith, their efforts and ours are not wasted."[4] Much later in his career, Webster could enumerate his "retractions," and those dogmatic matters which "in hindsight" he would have "handle[d] differently."[5] One consistent trajectory of Webster's career was the

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4. John Webster, "What's Happening in Continental Theology? - 1: The Legacy of Barth and Bultmann," *Evangel* (January 1983), 8-11. Emphasis added.
In an early work on Jüngel, Webster reflected that "[o]ne of the most difficult factors in a book of this kind is the formulation of a critical response to the subject. The temptation is [...] to offer a mere reverent paraphrase in which critical acumen simply goes by the board." See Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology*, 4. This temptation is a real one in respect of the present study also. The remedy is to keep in mind Jüngel's comment on Barth: "A thinker is honoured through thinking." See Eberhard Jüngel, ""...keine Menschenlosigkeit Gottes..." Zur Theologie Karl Barths Zwischen Theismus Und Atheismus," *Evangelische Theologie* 31 (1971), 332. Cited in Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology*, 22.

5. John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 3rd ed. (2001; repr., London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), xii. These particular "retractions" will be discussed below. *Word and Church* (hereafter *W&C*) is one of Webster's five major essay collections, alongside *Confessing God*, *The Domain of the Word*, and the two volumes of *God Without*

methodological move backwards (chronologically) in order to move forwards constructively. Indeed, this move was a conscious mining of spiritual and intellectual resources, always with an eye on potential progress: "Retrieval ought not to be nostalgia, but the expectant search for new possibilities."[6] This thesis, then, is intended as a work of Websterian retrieval, part of the repentant but expectant search in which both subject and author have been privileged to engage.

In summary, the argument that will be presented below is as follows: John Webster's doctrine of Scripture is a (theo)logical development from his theology proper, his wider concept of the God-world relation, and in particular his understanding of the interplay between divine and human agencies in the work of creating, saving, and perfecting creatures in the economy of grace.[7] Together, these elements form the architectonic theological structure within which Webster's doctrine of Scripture takes both its form and its material content. At the heart of this structure, it will be argued, is the Trinitarian concept of "revelation," which for

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Measure. Most of Webster's essays were previously published in other forms, such as journal articles. The method of citation adopted in this thesis is to cite first the original publication details, followed by the page numbers in the relevant essay collection, in cases where the work has been republished. Subsequent citations refer to page numbers in the relevant essay collection (unless specifically stated) which will be noted in abbreviated form in the reference. The reasons for citing references to Webster's essays in this way are threefold: (i) to enable readers to note the original publication dates of individual essays, useful for developing a sense of diachronic perspective in respect of Webster's work; (ii) to clarify the publications in which these essays first appeared, thereby making explicit Webster's original intended audience(s); and (iii) to facilitate easy access to references in the source texts, in the most readily-available format which is the essay collections rather than the individual works. Note that where essays are cited directly from a collection without other reference details (as in the case of this footnote), the reference is either to introductory or prefatory material, or to original essays not reproduced from elsewhere.

6. Ibid., xiii.

7. Webster never, of course, believed that humans create, save, or perfect themselves, or that they somehow "contribute" to their creation, salvation, or perfection. Yet, within the divine economy, creatures have an agency that is real and a part to play. This will all be explored in detail below.

Webster is shorthand for the saving presence of the eternal God to human creatures in the temporal/historical missions of the Son and the Spirit. Considered absolutely, this divine, saving presence is the immediate self-presentation of God in his turn to creatures, communicated to creatures by a work of divine grace.[8] It cannot therefore be equated with Holy Scripture. Scripture is, then, the divinely appointed, human-but-holy, ultimate, and instrumental *witness* to revelation, by means of which "accommodated" instrument God executes his rule over the church (proximately) and the world (ultimately). Webster's doctrine of Scripture therefore does not stand or fall in isolation: it may only be truly understood, appreciated, and evaluated, as part of a greater whole. Much groundwork will therefore be done in the early chapters below to put together the "big picture" of Webster's theology. In the last two chapters, a further, more critical, thesis will be articulated, namely, that Webster's doctrine of Scripture suffers from the lack of a truly Trinitarian, organic, and analogical understanding of the relationship between divine and human "speech," and a viable concept of general revelation. Acknowledging the validity of some recent criticisms of Webster's work, a range of sources from the Reformed tradition will be brought to bear, in an attempt to reframe these aspects of his doctrine and overcome more successfully the dualisms that Webster himself opposed.

John Webster's bibliology has been described as "a loud reaffirmation of the triune God at the heart of a Scripture-based Christianity."[9] This description is

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8. There is some diachronic difference in how these ideas are presented through Webster's career. In particular, it will be argued that there is a clear distinction between the "earlier" and "later" Webster. This will be explained and defended below.

9. This is the description of Webster's *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* on the first page of front matter: John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), i. It is not clear whether this is Webster's own description of his

apposite for several reasons. Methodologically, in a trend that developed throughout his career, Webster was a theologian of *re*affirmations. His theology evolved into a careful and loving work of *ressourcement*, in constant dialogue with, and conscious dependence upon, his intellectual and spiritual forebears in the faith. This is not to suggest that Webster merely repristinated tradition. In later life his favoured conversation-partners may have been the premoderns, but Webster himself cannot simply be classified as a premodern thinker. He has been well described as "a theologian who understands the currents of modern secular thought and is able to work from them towards a constructive position."[10]

Webster's was indeed a "loud" theological voice, not in the sense that either man or *métier* might be described as brash (μὴ γένοιτο!) but in the clarity of his clarion call to practise "theological theology" in the university, for the church and the world. Intrinsic to this prescription was Webster's relentless commitment to God the Holy Trinity as the ontological principle of all dogmatics. Webster's may have been something of a lone voice in the late 1990s – certainly, that was how he estimated himself[11] – but by the time of his death a small army of disciples and collaborators (graduate students, and more-or-less convinced colleagues) had been dispatched to churches and teaching institutions around the world.[12] Love him or loathe him, as

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book, or that of his publisher: either way, it is befitting.

10. Ibid. This thesis thus seeks to locate Webster's doctrine of Scripture in respect of modernity, premodernity, and postmodernity.

11. See below, on Webster's personal and institutional contexts.

12. By way of testimony to this point, a notice of Webster's death on the website of Wycliffe College, Toronto, where Webster taught from 1986-1997, mentions that he "influenced hundreds of students in both the basic and advanced degree departments." See Peter Mason, "Former Professor At Wycliffe, John Webster Passes Away," *Wycliffe College News* (2016): accessed 21 September 2018, https://www.wycliffecollege.ca/about/news-media/former-professor-wycliffe-john-webster-passes-away.
An eclectic group of Webster's many former doctoral students currently in academic settings includes Richard Topping (Principal, Vancouver School of Theology), Timothy Baylor

his work and influence developed it became harder and harder to ignore him. It is the conviction of this author that Webster's influence on the discipline of dogmatic theology is only likely to increase with time.

In respect of Scripture, Webster suggests that, "[w]e need to figure out what the text is in order to figure out what to do with it."[13] But what *is* Holy Scripture? Going a step further, Webster himself asks, "is there [even] such a thing as Holy Scripture?"[14] What, according to Webster, is Scripture's ontology?[15] How does this ontology relate to the way in which Scripture comes to be, and comes to be "used," and to the agency of agents (divine and human) who are active in these processes of writing and using Scripture?

Questions such as these are the concern of this thesis. The time is ripe to ask such questions, both by virtue of their intrinsic interest, and also because Webster's (now almost complete) theological corpus is ready for systematic analysis and evaluation. This work has already begun in the form of essays and occasional

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(Faculty Member, University of Wales Trinity Saint David), Tyler Wittman (Assistant Professor, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), Jon Coutts (Tutor, Trinity College, Bristol), Darren Sarisky (Departmental Lecturer in Theology, University of Oxford), Donald Wood (formerly Lecturer, University of Aberdeen), Kenneth Oakes (Assistant Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame), and R. David Nelson (Baker Academic and Brazos Press).

13. John Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," *Anglican Theological Review* 90 (2008), repr. in John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 116. *The Domain of the Word* is hereafter *DoW*.

14. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 1. Emphasis removed.

15. Even asking such a question is, of course, potentially a fraught enterprise. As Justin Holcomb writes, "to ask the question, what is scripture? is to become mired in a muddy pool of questions." A volume edited by Holcomb seeks to offer a "map" of doctrines of Scripture by means of a largely historical survey. Yet, as Holcomb himself admits, "[i]n claiming to offer a map, it is important to note that making a map of the wilderness renders it no less wild." Justin S. Holcomb, ed. *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1, 6.

pieces.[16] Webster's doctrine of Scripture in particular has been brought into conversation with other significant theologians in a recent doctoral thesis,[17] and is the special focus of two recent articles.[18] A "Companion" to Webster's theology is expected before long.[19] But no monograph on an aspect of Webster's theology has yet been published, and it is hoped that this thesis will be one of the first sustained contributions to what is likely to become a growing field of study. We are not always sure how Webster himself would have answered certain questions: in Fred Sanders' words, Webster's death "left the theological world in considerable suspense."[20] A further hope is therefore that this work, which is largely one of interpretation, may provoke others to continue labours in the unresolved dogmatic questions themselves. As Webster himself wrote in the penultimate year of his life, "[t]he task

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16. Significant contributions may be found in two recent issues of the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 19, no. 4 (2017), and 21, no. 1 (2019). A (non-specific) summary is offered in Paul Nimmo, "Editorial," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 1 (2019).

17. Brad R. East, "The Church's Book: Theology of Scripture in Ecclesial Context in the Work of John Howard Yoder, Robert Jenson, and John Webster," Ph.D. diss. (Yale University, 2017).

18. Darren Sarisky, "The Ontology of Scripture and the Ethics of Interpretation in the Theology of John Webster," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 1 (2019). Sarisky claims that, "[o]f all the contributions to constructive Christian theology that John Webster made over the course of his career, it is arguable that the locus where his work offers the most insight is the doctrine of Scripture." (Ibid., 59.) See also Fred Sanders, "Holy Scripture Under the Auspices of the Holy Trinity: On John Webster's Trinitarian Doctrine of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 1 (2019).

19. The tentatively-titled *Companion to the Theology of John Webster* is expected to be published by Eerdmans in the spring of 2020. Proposed contributions include essays on Webster and Jüngel, Webster and Barth, theology in the university, biblical interpretation, exegesis, the Trinity, divine perfections, metaphysics, creation, Christology, salvation, ethics, and ecclesiology. (Personal communication from David Nelson, 15 April 2019.)

20. Sanders, "Holy Scripture Under the Auspices of the Holy Trinity," 4.

of developing an account of the nature of Scripture and its readers in which theological doctrine is expected to take the lead is one which remains unfinished."[21]

By way of summary of what follows, chapter one ("John Webster and his Theology") presents a contextual introduction to Webster's life and theological project, informed by his own autobiographical reflections, research interviews with some of his peers in the academy, and the wider reception of his work. Chapter two ("John Webster's Theological Project: A Summary") develops the thesis that Webster's theology may be characterised as a response to the perceived problems of *modernity* (material and formal) by means of a (methodological) retrieval of *premodern* theological resources, articulated in and for a *postmodern* context. This thesis is articulated and defended with sensitivity to Webster's diachronic development. In chapter three ("The God-Creature Relation and Revelation in John Webster's Theology"), the aim is to set out Webster's understanding of the God-creature relation and "revelation," in order to situate – and so correctly interpret – his doctrine of Scripture in the context of his broader dogmatics. The chapter thus includes discussion of Webster's epistemology, ontology, and ethics. Chapter four ("John Webster's Doctrine of Scripture: Foundations") deals briefly with formal considerations, before focusing upon the key material aspects of Webster's bibliology, interpreted in the light of his account of divine and human agency, and the God-creature relation. It is argued that for Webster, revelation is *immediate*, because of its relationship to the divine essence. But, equally, given its creaturely term, revelation is *mediated*. This chapter includes detailed interaction with some of Webster's critics, especially in the areas of Scripture's relationship to the church, and the nature of interpretation. Chapter five ("The Divine Word and Human Words") considers what is arguably the central critical issue in Webster's doctrine of

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21. Webster, *W&C*, xii.

Scripture, namely, the precise relationship between the divine Word – or "revelation" – and the human words of the Bible. A critical interaction with Webster's bibliological deployment of the concepts of providence, sanctification, and inspiration will be offered here. Finally, chapter six ("Assessment") constitutes a summative evaluation of Webster's doctrine of Scripture, in conversation with other options, particularly from the Reformed tradition with which he interacts extensively.

§ 1. John Webster and His Theology

1.1 Introduction

One distinctive of this thesis is its attempt to understand John Webster in the various contexts within which he worked – personal, ecclesial, and institutional. With no definitive (or even provisional) biography of Webster available, the details in the picture below have been filled out and coloured in by means of a series of research interviews conducted with Webster's former colleagues and friends. Deep gratitude is due to those who generously gave of their time to help with both personal reminiscences and incisive theological reflections on Webster and his work.[1] Methodologically, it is important to register that the research interview is a different kind of evidence to published written work, and it carries a greater inherent capacity for (historical) inaccuracy. Given this constraint, corroboration of key points has been sought, where possible, from multiple sources.

This opening chapter begins with an introduction to John Webster's life and his theological project, which will form the necessary background against which to describe and interpret his doctrinal project (and his doctrine of Scripture in particular) in the chapters that follow. A brief biographical sketch leads into an attempt to "situate" Webster in the contexts in which he worked and worshipped. This will be followed by some initial diachronic observations about continuity and development in Webster's theology, and a suggested periodisation of his career. Finally, comment will be made on Webster's intended audience, his interlocutors, and the general reception his work has received. Much of this chapter thus consists

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1. Permission to cite from interview for the purposes of this research was granted by professors Williams, O'Donovan, and Newlands. Edited transcripts of interviews with Rowan Williams and George Newlands are included, with permission, in an appendix to this thesis. Citations from these theologians in this chapter are all from interviews.

of preliminaries, but the preliminaries take the form of a necessary foundational framework for interpreting Webster's theology, according to which the rest of this thesis will take shape.

1.2 Who was John Webster? A Brief Biographical Sketch

John Bainbridge Webster was born on 20 June 1955, in the English market town of Mansfield, Nottinghamshire. His parents were Gordon George Webster, a book-keeper, and Ruth (née Bainbridge). Despite his alleged "reticence for autobiography,"[2] Webster wrote an autobiographical account of his vocational journey, entitled "Discovering Dogmatics" in 2002.[3] This article was largely the basis of the biographical details found in Ivor Davidson's contribution to Webster's *Festschrift*, "John," written shortly before Webster's death, although Davidson's appreciation offers some additional details and analysis.[4]

As a boy, Webster moved north from Mansfield to Yorkshire, and attended Bradford Grammar School.[5] From there he went up to Clare College, Cambridge (matriculating in 1974) to read English literature. Webster's childhood was influenced by what he called "watery suburban Methodism."[6] Webster later reflected that it was during his time in Cambridge that he was converted to "a tough version of

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2. East, "The Church's Book," 111.

3. John Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics," in *Shaping A Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

4. Ivor J. Davidson, "John," in *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster*, eds. R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky, and Justin Stratis (London: T&T Clark, 2015).

5. Webster is listed as a "notable old Bradfordian" on the school website: accessed 20 June 2018, www.bradfordgrammar.com/former-pupils/notable-old-bradfordians.

6. Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics," 129.

Calvinistic Christianity."[7] Before long he switched to read theology. As Webster recalls, "[h]umanly speaking, I became a theologian largely by accident."[8] His undergraduate dissertation, supervised by Rowan Williams (then a twenty-eight-year-old tutor at the Cambridge Anglican theological college, Westcott House) was on Wolfhart Pannenberg.[9] As a graduate student, Webster focused on another German theologian, Eberhard Jüngel,[10] and it was this work that drew him into engagement with Karl Barth, of whom he became one of the world's leading interpreters.

Webster's first job after his Ph.D. was a research fellowship in Sheffield (1981-82). This was followed by a post as Lecturer in Systematics at St John's College, Durham, where he remained until 1986. It was during this period, in 1983, that Webster was ordained as a priest in the Church of England.[11] From 1986 to

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7. Ibid. George Newlands, Webster's Ph.D. supervisor, recalls in interview that Webster was a Methodist when they first met in Cambridge. It is not clear how Webster came to be an Anglican. Two men who would certainly have had some influence on Webster in his undergraduate (and postgraduate) days were (i) Arthur Peacocke, Dean of Clare College, and also Tutor and Director of Studies in Theology, 1973-84. Peacocke self-identified as a panentheist, and would have had little in common with Webster theologically. However, Peacocke would undoubtedly have had significant input into Webster's course of study; and (ii) C. F. D. "Charlie" Moule, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1951 to 1976, who was also a Fellow of Clare College. Newlands describes him as "a great guru of evangelical Biblical studies," although he was more of a moderate than a conservative evangelical. Moule's influence around Clare College in Webster's day would have been inescapable. He died in 2007.

8. Ibid.

9. Williams, interview.

10. George Newlands was responsible for suggesting research on Jüngel to Webster. See transcript of interview with Newlands for details. Webster himself remembered the particular influence during his Cambridge days of the two Scottish theologians George Newlands and Donald MacKinnon. (Ibid., 130.)

11. From 1983-86, Webster served as Honorary Assistant Curate at the church of St Edmund King and Martyr in Bearpark, a former mining village near Durham.
See https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/3-june/gazette/deaths/deaths, accessed

1995, Webster spent a decade in Ontario, Canada, teaching at Wycliffe College, where he was appointed to a full professorship in 1993.[12] He returned to England to take up the prestigious Lady Margaret professorship of divinity at the University of Oxford in 1995, and remained in Oxford until 2003.[13] After this, for the rest of his life, Webster worked at universities in Scotland, first as Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Aberdeen (2003-13)[14] and then finally as Professor of Divinity in the University of St Andrews, from 2013 until his death.[15] John Webster

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24 September 2018.

12. Webster was appointed to the Ramsay Armitage Professorship of Systematic Theology at Wycliffe College.

Oliver O'Donovan recalls his first meeting with Webster in Durham, at which O'Donovan "spent a couple of hours with him, expatiating on the advantages of Toronto as a place to do theology in." O'Donovan's influence and persuasion seem to have been key factors in Webster's move to Toronto.

13. Again, O'Donovan (who had been at Oxford since 1982) seems to have been a crucial influence on Webster's move to Oxford. In interview, O'Donovan recalled,

> We [the electoral committee for the Lady Margaret professorship] were looking for the appointee and just at that time I was working as an associate editor on Jean-Yves Lacoste's *Dictionnaire de Theologie*, compiling the ethics articles, and John's essay on "Conscience" that appeared in that volume landed on my desk, and I thought to myself, this is simply streets ahead of anything I've seen written by any of the candidates for the Lady Margaret chair, so I asked the chairman's permission, copied it, and just gave out copies of this article to the Lady Margaret electoral committee, and said, "Is there a case for simply inviting this man to come to interview, to see if he could be persuaded to do it?" And they agreed there was. So, he did agree to come over for the interview and then the rest is history. They rolled out the red carpet for him at Christ Church, and he was persuaded to come.

14. While at Aberdeen, Webster taught an annual final-year undergraduate course on "Theology of Karl Barth," and a graduate course called "Principles of Systematic Theology." See http://www.abdn.ac.uk/registry/pgcourses12/display.php?Subject=DR, accessed 21 November 2017.

15. At St Andrews, Webster taught an undergraduate honours course on "The Study of Theology." The course description is an interesting summary of some of Webster's methodological priorities in the final years of his teaching career, and may be found at https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/media/publications/coursecatalogue/undergraduate/2013-2014/honourslevel/divinity-13-14-hons.pdf, accessed 22 November 2017.

died suddenly at home in Turriff, Aberdeenshire, on the morning of 25 May 2016. He was twice married, first to Jane Goodden in 1978 (the marriage ended in divorce in 2008), and then to Gloria Ayako Tabuchi, who survived him.[16]

1.3 Webster in Context

> *No theology can proceed without reaching some judgment about circumstance, that is, decisions about what needs to be said in a given setting*.[17]

If Webster is correct about the need to make judgments about "setting" before undertaking the theological task, it seems reasonable to require similar judgments before laying out the theology of others for analysis and evaluation. This section is therefore concerned with Webster's own "settings." It takes the form of an account of his various contexts – personal, ecclesial, and institutional.[18]

Why should such a study be necessary? In the revised introduction to his textbook on Karl Barth (cited here from the second edition of *Barth*, retitled *Karl Barth*, 2004) Webster makes some interesting observations that reflect the need to situate a theologian's writing within his or her context. "Barth's life and work are

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16. These dates and personal details are available as a matter of public record at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk, accessed 20 June 2018.

17. John Webster, "4: Immanuel," *Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology. Perfection & Presence: God With Us, according to the Christian Confession* (2007).

18. The language of "context" is used here, with awareness that Webster himself did not prefer it. See Webster, *W&C*, 4-5. Webster's critique of "context" language does not rule out the present contextual analysis of his own work. It is possible to concede what he calls the "occasional" nature of all theology, while using the language of "context" to situate both theology and theologian in matrices that, to a greater-or-lesser extent, make their influence felt over a long period. Sometimes, such influences may have been "transparent and self-evident" to Webster himself: in other cases, they may be better perceived with the benefit of hindsight, or by an outsider's eye. Indeed, elsewhere, Webster acknowledges "contexts [such as] determinations and constraints in the intellectual work of theology: theology is human work in human history." See John Webster, *Holiness* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 15.

inseparable," Webster writes, "and his writings need to be read in the light of his biography and vice-versa."[19] One reason for this is perhaps unique to Barth, namely his significance in public life, ecclesially and even (inter-) nationally. The same could hardly be said of John Webster.[20] But the other reason Webster gives, namely that "Barth's identity was very tightly bound up with his external vocation, so that public and personal come together in an intimate way," bears some consideration.[21] While it is not obvious in respect of Webster's written corpus that he was "highly self-conscious about the course of his life, and especially about his intellectual development" (as Webster describes Barth),[22] – at least on a surface-level treatment – it is nevertheless demonstrable that there are important connections between Webster's life and his work. This demonstration will be subject to the limitations imposed by the available sources, and we should heed Webster's own warning in his biographical account of Barth, that the latter's "many-sided personality which lies behind [his] writings [...] does not, of course, mean that his theology should be read as a sort of encoded autobiography, for he was a sternly objective thinker."[23] Yet we may surely say of Webster just as Webster said of Barth:

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19. John Webster, *Barth* 2nd ed. (2000; repr., London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 2.

20. Although Webster's churchly influence and significance is coming to be more widely recognised, it is a common criticism of his work that he was not more politically engaged, or that he did not address the "world" as much as he did the church. Brad East, for example, describes Webster's work as "pervasively apolitical." See Brad East, "John Webster, Theologian Proper," *Anglican Theological Review* 99, no. 2 (2017), 345. See also Ivor J. Davidson, "In Memoriam: John Webster (1955–2016)," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 4 (2016), 368. Davidson does not critique Webster personally but he lists a number of criticisms frequently levelled at Webster, including that Webster "prescind[s] from the [...] complexities of Christian political, social and cultural existence in the world."

21. Webster, *Barth*, 2.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 13.

"despite much that remains unknown about [his] inner life, much can and needs to be said at the biographical level."[24]

There are obvious ways in which Barth and Webster were different, not least Barth's "vigorously active public life" and his "powerful" personality with its "certain alienating effect."[25] No-one, surely, would have described John Webster in such terms! But, a number of elements of Barth's biography to which Webster draws attention find interesting parallels in Webster's own life.

First, in terms of the trajectory of Barth's intellectual development, Webster notes that from the early 1930s, "Barth achieved a confidence about his theological commitments which made his writing increasingly calm, unapologetic and descriptively rich."[26] Barth "articulated a theological identity formed out of biblical and dogmatic habits of thought with rigorous consistency and a certain exclusiveness."[27] No doubt partly under Barth's influence, but also consonant with an important stream running through the Christian tradition, Webster developed the strong conviction that theology must proceed on its own terms and according to its own methods. Second, there is commonality between Barth and Webster in the idea that, for both men, "personal identity was strongly defined in vocational categories."[28] Webster, as we shall see below, understood his work as the fulfilment of a particular calling towards the church, before God. Third, and finally, just as Barth "in both public and private life [...] experienced relationships which were strained or which ended in estrangement," so Webster had his personal and

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24. Ibid., 2.

25. Ibid., 10, 11, 13.

26. Ibid., 7.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 11.

professional struggles.[29] Webster's comment on the effect these relational difficulties had on Barth is notable for the light it may shed on Webster's own position within the academy as he perceived it: "Experiences here [in strained relationships] often led Barth to cast himself in the role of outsider and explain his isolation to himself and others in terms of his sense that the primary ideas which drove his work had not been grasped or heeded or were contravened by the teachings and actions of others."[30] We will find echoes below of each of these themes in Webster's own experience.

1.3.1 Personal Context

The discussion here of "personal context" is limited for the most part to matters that have a demonstrable bearing on the development of Webster's theology. Therefore, this section covers what might be considered "internal" matters (*e.g.* of Webster's personality) and "external" matters, relating to Webster's close relationships. This section is dependent on research interviews with some of Webster's former friends and colleagues in the academy. Sensitivity is required in this undertaking, for not much time has passed since Webster's death, and at this stage research rightly plays second fiddle to respect. Some facts of substance uncovered in the course of research may well be thought to have intrinsic interest, but have not been included in the final thesis for reasons of discretion. A full "critical biography" of John Webster, if such a work is ever to be written, must await the passage of time, if only to establish appropriate "critical distance" from its subject.

Notwithstanding the above caveats, two aspects of Webster's personal context seem to be of particular interest and significance for the present study: (1)

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29. Ibid., 13. See below on the nature of some of these struggles.

30. Ibid.

his personality, and (2) his experience of conflict and broken relationships. As will become clear, these two are not unrelated.

First, John Webster was highly introverted, and even somewhat reclusive by nature. This point is confirmed by numerous observations made in interview by Webster's former colleagues. Webster's introversion is perhaps not an aspect of his personality that many of his graduate students would immediately recognise, given that Webster was typically "devoted" to his students and "gave them all his attention."[31] In addition, colleagues typically enjoyed Webster's company. In Rowan Williams' estimation, "There was a side of him which was the sort of taciturn Yorkshireman, whose habitual bluntness just set a very clear limit, and his not suffering fools gladly, and that was how he presented himself. That was how he presented, that's how he related, so he could be great fun to be with, but he didn't take prisoners."[32]

The introversion that his academic colleagues describe seems to have been manifested partly in Webster's shyness (not unconnected, perhaps, to his humility) and partly in his reticence to talk about his private life, even with close friends and colleagues. In O'Donovan's estimation, Webster's introversion "became more and more marked" after he left Oxford, to the extent that he no longer kept up with old friends: indeed, Webster's move to Scotland "offered him the freedom to do what he did, which was, in the end, to turn in on himself, and become quite isolated." O'Donovan says that "it is absolutely necessary to insist that John did not confide in anyone about [personal] matters. I never met anyone who claimed to have heard a word in confidence from John about his family. This was *verboten*. And so there was a big uptightness there."

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31. O'Donovan, interview.

32. Williams, interview.

Second, Webster struggled with certain professional, ecclesial, and personal relationships, some of which ended in stalemate or breakdown: here, we may note in passing the breakdown of his first marriage. Such professional and ecclesial relationships fall under consideration of Webster's "institutional" contexts below.

What is the relevance of these observations for a study of Webster's theology? In much of Webster's later work, there is a sense that the theologian himself shrinks in the face of the immense and ubiquitous God.[33] Webster's extensive reading in the Augustinian ascetic tradition in his later years (Benedict and Cassian, for example) likely meant that he was to some extent influenced by the mediaeval spiritual preoccupation with the soul before God. This influence, surely, cohered to some degree with Webster's own shyness and his private temperament, as well as his sense of being marginalised or even ostracised from certain communities. Michael Allen, reflecting on the final years of Webster's career, notes a new "contemplative focus as a distinct end."[34] Tracing references to contemplation in Webster's later published works, Allen concludes that this theme is "not an idiosyncrasy but a truly new focal point."[35] Thus, at least some of Webster's later essays on Christian virtues (and vices) can be read as arising in part from his own personal-contextual reflections.

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33. For Katherine Sonderegger, Webster was a "God-intoxicated" theologian who composed "God-saturated essays." Sonderegger thus links the man with his work: "So deep was his hunger for knowledge and worship of God that Webster's theology seemed driven to a God-centered end: less and less about other theologians; fewer and fewer excurses into modern university talk; more, and more intense, focus upon the Perfect Being who is God, His Serene, Effortless Majesty, His Aseity and Perfect Life." See Katherine Sonderegger, "The God-Intoxicated Theology of A Modern Theologian," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 1 (2019), 24-25.

34. Michael Allen, "Toward Theological Theology: Tracing the Methodological Principles of John Webster," *Themelios* 41, no. 2 (2016), 236.

35. Ibid., 236. See particularly n106.

Webster's theology never reads as though he has developed a so-called "bunker mentality." But at times, the author appears self-consciously beleaguered or aware of his isolation. As late as 2016, in the introduction to *Word and Church*, Webster is aware that he risks casting himself "in the role of a theological Ishmael."[36] In his *Dogmatic Sketch*, by way of further example, Webster writes, "I am acutely aware both that what many of my contemporaries regard as self-evident I find to be puzzling or unpersuasive and that matters which I regard as self-evident make many of my contemporaries feel bewildered."[37]

In conclusion, we do well to bear in mind John Webster's shyness and his struggles as we read his theology. Granted, these aspects of his "personal" context perhaps influence as much what Webster does *not* tell us as what he does. Additionally, interpreters must not fall into the trap of trying to over-psychoanalyse their subject. But in theology, as in any discipline, we do not read works that proceed from a vacuum. In reading Webster we read the work of a man who keenly felt the suffering of living in a sin-stricken world, and who knew the abasement of confronting and confessing his own sin. We find in Webster a man whose personal experience of hurt, brokenness, forgiveness, and reconciliation no doubt enriched

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36. Webster, *W&C*, 6. The reference is to Gen 16:12:

> Of Ishmael it was said,
> "He shall be a wild donkey of a man,
> his hand against everyone
> and everyone's hand against him,
> and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." (ESV)

37. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 2. Consider also Webster's remark in the context of a lament over the "pathology" of modern theology: "[W]e should probably worry more about what Bernard or Calvin might think of us than about the way in which *wissenschaftlich* colleagues may shake their heads." This comment at least lends some credence to the view that the later Webster felt more at home among the premoderns! See John Webster, "Christ, Church and Reconciliation," in *W&C*, 211.

his understanding of the God about whom, and about whose gospel, he so eloquently and passionately wrote.

1.3.2 Ecclesial Context

John Webster was, self-consciously and vocationally, a theologian *in* and *for* the church. This is the unanimous testimony of his colleagues. In Oliver O'Donovan's estimation, Webster was "clearly a church-bird, and there's no doubt about that. He has this deep passion for the instruction of the church [...] He believes in theology as a church activity, and he therefore believes in the need for its purification." Rowan Williams, likewise, described Webster as a "profoundly ecclesial theologian," although at the same time, "one of the least 'churchy' of people."[38]

For his part, Webster himself, likewise, has a consistent emphasis on the *church*-centredness of the theological task. He insists that theology must be located in the church, and in service of the church.[39] For Webster, the office of theology is, above all, churchly. Theology is "pastoral" in the community of the baptised.[40] And in that community theology "guides [...] by exemplifying submission to Holy Scripture as the *viva vox Dei*."[41] Such an emphasis is not just about the location of

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38. The distinction, for Williams, is "all-important": Webster was "very conscious of theologising for the Body of Christ [...] and in the Body of Christ, and very conscious of being a theologian who was also a pastor and a preacher." Nevertheless, Williams wonders if the daily life (political, as well as religious) of Christ Church Cathedral was more than Webster would have desired: "[F]or what it's worth the impression is that [cathedral life] wasn't John's idea of a good time." The particulars of Webster's relationship with the institution of Christ Church, Oxford, will be considered in the sub-section on his professional context below.

39. Webster, *Holiness*, 25.

40. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 128.

41. Ibid.

the theologian, but about locating the very works of God, for the church, in Webster's account, is holy, elected to a life ordered towards God in praise.[42] Webster's ecclesiology, as it relates to his doctrine of Scripture, will be discussed in some detail later. For now, an account of Webster's relation to particular ecclesial communities follows. Again, the point of this section is to "situate" Webster and his theology in contexts which he doubtless influenced, and by which he was himself also influenced.

As noted above, Webster grew up in the Methodist tradition, but some time after arriving at Cambridge in October 1974, he came to identify with a robustly Calvinistic theology. From this point forward, and for the rest of his life, Webster was an Anglican. At Cambridge, he probably attended St John's, Hills Road.[43] This was not a typical student church, but in the 1970s it did attract some who were seeking "something a little bit more theological than Holy Trinity"[44] in a time "before the Round Church [...] was quite such a distinctive brand."[45] It is significant that Webster did not choose to worship at either of these two better-known Anglican churches, which were both geographically closer to his college than St John's, Hills Road. Williams suggests that Webster may have been one of those who "deliberately wanted to step a little bit aside from the student churches." If there were theological issues involved in his decision, St John's would have been less conservative than either Holy Trinity or the Round Church.

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42. See Webster, *Holiness*, chapter 3, "The Holiness of the Church".

43. Williams, interview.

44. Charles Simeon had been the incumbent at Holy Trinity Church, on Market Street, from 1783-1836. Since Simeon's day, the church had a long history of ministry among university students, in the evangelical tradition.

45. Williams, interview. The Round Church, which meets today in St Andrew the Great, was another evangelical church in central Cambridge that had a strong work among students.

As an undergraduate, Webster was also "quite involved with the Christian Union" (Williams) and this association would undoubtedly have shaped his religious life. The Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) was the world's first Christian Union, and had developed along strongly evangelical lines.[46] Webster's involvement with the CICCU perhaps also gave rise to his connection with the evangelical Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship (RTSF) which published his first monograph, a pamphlet on Rudolf Bultmann, in 1980.[47]

As noted above, Webster served as honorary assistant curate in a local parish church following his ordination as a priest in the Church of England. In Canada, Webster continued to attend an Anglican church with his family. According to Oliver O'Donovan, his predecessor in the professorship in Toronto, this would certainly have been a "recognisably evangelical Anglican church there: middle to evangelical."

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46. The story of the CICCU is told in Oliver R. Barclay and Robert M. Horn, *From Cambridge to the World: 125 Years of Student Witness* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002). Interestingly, Barclay and Horn note that, "In the 1970s the CICCU [...] was the largest student religious body [in Cambridge University]. It had over 400 actual members and more at its biggest meeting, the weekly Bible Reading. In total, around 1,000 were in Bible Study groups in colleges – nearly 10 per cent of all undergraduates. [...] In that situation the CICCU sometimes had a larger fringe than before. That meant that its members were no longer compelled to think about the difference between evangelical and liberal views or to decide which to adopt." (Ibid., 195.)

Anecdotally, Rev. Dr Paul Weston, currently Admissions Tutor for Ordinands at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, who was CICCU President in 1978, revealed in a personal email that he did not have any personal contact with John Webster in the CICCU, nor did he even "realise that he was around when we were at Cambridge." (Personal email communication, 3 August 2018.) Of course, the CICCU was a large society. But this communication from Weston strongly suggests that Webster was not involved in any leadership role, where he would hardly have gone unnoticed.

47. John Webster, *Rudolf Bultmann: An Introductory Interpretation* (Leicester: Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship, 1980). RTSF is part of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF; known as InterVarsity in the U.S.A., and in most other countries as IFES) and was the original publisher of the journal *Themelios*. This latter journal published another of Webster's early works: John Webster, "The Identity of the Holy Spirit: A Problem in Trinitarian Theology," *Themelios* 37 (1983).

On his appointment at Oxford, Webster took on a heavy schedule of commitments as part of his membership of the cathedral chapter at Christ Church, although it is likely that his young family would have worshipped elsewhere.[48]

Webster's own commitment to the particular tradition of Anglicanism is not always evident from his written works, given his typical adversion to a denominationally wide range of sources. But he did, on occasion, contribute to specifically Anglican concerns and questions.[49] In 1997, Webster and his Toronto colleague Alan Hayes co-authored a short book in support of the Anglican service of Morning Prayer.[50] Years later, Webster continued to promote the discipline of morning prayer in King's College Chapel in Aberdeen. East comments that "Webster's 'Anglicanism' is of the Reformed evangelical variety, and so a bit

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48. The Lady Margaret professorship, in common with Oxford's other traditional chairs in theology, came attached to a joint role as residentiary canon in the cathedral. Christ Church was re-founded by Henry VIII as a teaching cathedral, and it is the only Oxford or Cambridge college in which the college chapel also functions as a diocesan cathedral. Some details of the particular commitments attached to Webster's position may be found in the appended transcript of the interview with Rowan Williams, who (like Oliver O'Donovan) also served as a residentiary canon at Christ Church.

49. See, for example, John Webster, "Ministry and Priesthood," in *The Study of Anglicanism*, eds. Stephen Sykes and John E. Booty (London: SPCK, 1988); John Webster, "Lambeth: A Comment," *Pro Ecclesia* 8, no. 2 (1999); John Webster, "The Goals of Ecumenism," in *Paths to Unity: Explorations in Ecumenical Method*, ed. Paul Avis (London: Church House Publishing, 2004); John Webster, "*Ut Unum Sint*: Some Cross-Bench Anglican Reflections," in *Ecumenism Today: The Universal Church in the 21st Century*, eds. Francesca A. Murphy and Christopher Asprey (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

50. Alan L. Hayes and John Webster, *What Happened to Morning Prayer? The Service of the Word as A Principal Sunday Liturgy* (Toronto: Wycliffe College, 1997).
I am indebted to Professor Hayes for supplying me with a copy of this work, discussion of which (or even reference to) is entirely missing from the existing secondary literature on Webster. Indeed, this particular publication is notably absent from the otherwise comprehensive bibliography of Webster's published works in R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky, and Justin Stratis, eds. *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 349-58.

stretched; but that does not mean he held his communion at arm's length, for he was deeply knowledgeable of its history and engaged in its ecumenical prospects."[51]

Webster's move to Scotland meant a change in his relationship with the church. His chair at Aberdeen University, unlike the chair in Oxford, was not an ecclesial appointment. Aberdeen has historic links with the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland, but Webster remained an Anglican by churchmanship. There was, initially, involvement with the Scottish Episcopalian Church, and Webster was part of the Episcopal church in Ellon. After his divorce in 2008, Webster lived about an hour's drive north of Aberdeen in a small village called New Byth, near Turriff. He remained there until his death, even after moving job to St Andrews, which was nearly three hours' drive from his home. It seems as though in his latter years Webster all but lost a living church connection, and did not regularly attend worship anywhere, even though he would preach intermittently by invitation in various churches, including those affiliated with the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland. This picture of Webster's church involvement comports with the evidence we have seen above of his (partly self-imposed) "isolation" towards the end of his life.

A corrective must therefore be registered to a certain view of Webster as being at the centre of ecclesiastical life in Britain, or at least to the view that ecclesiastical life was at the centre of *his* life. Webster was, vocationally, a theologian in and for the church, but his relationship with the church, in its local manifestations at least, was not always straightforward, and seems to have broken down towards

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51. East, "The Church's Book," 117. It is not entirely clear what East means when he describes Webster's Anglicanism as "a bit stretched." Perhaps this remark reflects a north-American Anglican perspective, as opposed to an English (Church of England) one. Recent figures from England report that 70% of those being selected for ordination in the national church are evangelicals. See Harriet Sherwood, "As Traditional Believers Turn Away, is This A New Crisis of Faith?" *The Guardian* (2016): accessed 21 September 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/13/church-of-england-evangelical-drive.

the end of his life. Brad East rightly notes the significance of Webster's Anglican ordination for interpreting his *oeuvre*, precisely because his ordination placed him "in a particular ecclesiastical context as a clergyman who regularly preached the word and presided at the sacrament." But this observation must be nuanced, especially with regard to the final decade of Webster's life. In addition, East's characterisation of Webster's context as one of "formal establishment" fails to register the significance of Webster's permanent move to Scotland in 2003.[52]

John Webster loved the church, because Christ loved the church. He studiously endeavoured to avoid "the indifference, weariness or irony of the late career religious professional."[53] Webster's absence from active church life can hardly have been meant as an exemplar for those who would follow him in the theological task. But neither should it be taken as an indication that he was unable to love Christ's church εἰς τέλος (John 13:1). Instead, it may be interpreted as a factor of weakness, arising from the complicated and sometimes broken relationships with which he struggled, for the most part silently.

1.3.3 Institutional Context

This section examines the relationship Webster had with the various academic institutions in which he worked, beginning with St John's College in Durham, and working through his career chronologically. The cumulative force of

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52. East, "The Church's Book," 116. In Scotland, the national church is Presbyterian, although the Church of Scotland is not established as a state church. The Scottish Episcopal Church (which is in communion with the Church of England) is not part of the religious settlement north of the border with England.

53. John Webster, "Theology and the Peace of the Church," in *DoW*, 167. In context, the reference is not autobiographical, but relates to the church's "public passion for gospel truth." Even so, it is hard not to detect a personal reference in these words.

this description will demonstrate that Webster was not, for the most part, content in these institutions. This is significant for understanding the development of his theology, precisely because his view of the theological task was developed in conversation with (and to a large extent, in opposition to) an institutional framework which – in Webster's view – failed to afford systematic theology its rightful place.

The theological college of St John's College, Durham, is associated with the "open evangelical" tradition in the Church of England. Webster worked there for four years (1982-86), but according to O'Donovan, "he was not happy with the environment, as others were not. [...] And [he] was cautiously ready to consider alternatives that would send him a long way away."[54]

The "alternative" arose with the opportunity to follow in O'Donovan's footsteps to Wycliffe College, Toronto. O'Donovan describes Wycliffe College as "a small, self-contained, intellectually fairly lower-middle rank, respectable-without-being-distinguished-in-any-way, kind of institution." In the early 1980s, Wycliffe College was experimenting with a "consortium" approach, in collaboration with other theological colleges in Toronto. This furnished the occasion for Webster's relationship with one of the greatest personal influences on his life's work, the Jesuit priest, George Schner. The significance of Schner for understanding Webster will be assessed below.

By the late 1990s, Webster had become "increasingly unhappy" at Wycliffe.[55] At Oliver O'Donovan's suggestion, the electoral committee for the Lady Margaret Professorship at Oxford invited Webster for interview, and he was swiftly

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54. In interview, O'Donovan did not specify the reason for Webster's unhappiness.

55. O'Donovan, interview.

appointed.[56] By all accounts, Webster was "loved by colleagues and students"[57] in the City of Dreaming Spires, but Oxford was also a difficult place for him, institutionally. As noted above, the responsibilities of the cathedral chapter were onerous, although Webster probably enjoyed them for the most part.[58] He had a difficult relationship with Keith Ward, the Regius Professor of Divinity. Ward was in many ways the polar opposite of Webster – "liberal, pretty rationalist" – and according to O'Donovan, Webster "didn't know how to put sufficient distance between them."[59] A public spat in print with David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, contributed to another tense relationship with a significant contemporary, this time in the Fens.[60]

In Aberdeen, Webster certainly found himself with more opportunity to shape the research culture of an institution that was already predisposed to follow his approach to teaching theology. Under his influence, a number of more-or-less like-minded colleagues were appointed, including Philip Ziegler, Donald Wood, and Tom Greggs. In many ways, the Aberdeen years seem to have been the most institutionally "settled" of Webster's academic career. But, in 2013, Webster accepted a position at St Andrews. For Webster personally, the move to St Andrews does not seem to have been a successful one. Faced with a different institutional

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56. See O'Donovan's description in interview (cited also in the introduction above) of the process by which Webster came to be appointed at Oxford.

57. O'Donovan, interview. Countless online testimonies by Webster's former students and colleagues underline O'Donovan's point.

58. See interviews with Williams and O'Donovan.

59. O'Donovan, interview.

60. See the review article: John Webster, "Article Review: David F. Ford: Self and Salvation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 4 (2001). Ford's response came in David F. Ford, "Salvation and the Nature of Theology: A Response to John Webster's Review of *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 4 (2001). As Ford suggests at the start of his article, the disagreement between the two was about no small matter: "How ought Christian theology to be done?"

culture, Webster struggled to attract the sort of cohort of students he had succeeded in bringing to Aberdeen.

What was at the root of Webster's institutional struggles? One cause of these can doubtless be traced to theological and personal differences with colleagues, and this is identifiable in Webster's written work, where – as we have seen – Webster frequently cast himself in the role of outsider. But O'Donovan also suggests that there may have been something deeper: Webster, he suggests,

> believe[d] in theology as a church activity, and he therefore believe[d] in the need for its purification. There [wa]s a certain single-mindedness to [his theological work], and a certain devotion to it, and I think that underlies a lot of what is mysterious about his career, including his restlessness in his various institutions: the sorts of compromises that institutions make in order to be institutions, and to achieve certain excellencies, what they're prepared to sacrifice on other fronts, were always troubling to him. And I suspect that he was always hunting for the perfect theological school, which would teach and reflect single-mindedly and orderedly upon the Gospel [...H]e was always a little disappointed with what his colleagues managed.[61]

Of course, if Webster was searching for "the perfect theological school," he never found it. As O'Donovan wryly puts it, "In pursuing the perfect institution for teaching theology, I suspect it must have been an institution without a faculty in it." Webster's dissatisfaction with the "establishment" in the theological academy – in both the United Kingdom and North America – was a factor of his conviction that many, if not most, of his colleagues had misunderstood the nature of what a theological faculty or divinity school ought to be. As we will see, this is connected to his view that institutions of theological education in the English-speaking world had, for the most part, capitulated to a modern, dualist paradigm which rendered them relatively and frustratingly ineffective in their own most basic vocation. That he saw out his career in such institutions despite the frustration is itself remarkable

61. O'Donovan, interview.

testimony to Webster's deep conviction that in the "Domain of the Word" he was not fighting a lost cause.

1.4 Continuity and Development in Webster's Theology: Some Diachronic Observations

Two recent writers have proposed periodisations in respect of John Webster's career. The schemes are rather different, so some assessment is required. Kevin Vanhoozer, first, proposes an "early," "middle," and "late" periodisation.[62] In Vanhoozer's view, the "early" period covers Webster's time at Cambridge, Sheffield, and Durham. Vanhoozer writes that,

> [t]he focus of [Webster's] undergraduate studies in theology at Cambridge was on identifying, analyzing, and trying to respond to problems, in particular the "problem of modernity," which amounted to finding the right language, method, and conceptual scheme for making God-talk intelligible. In this early period, he was looking elsewhere than theology for answers.[63]

Vanhoozer dates the "middle" period of Webster's career to the decade 1986-1995, summed up as his "stint in Canada." These were the years of specialisation in Barth studies:

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62. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "John Webster: A Testimonial," (2016): accessed 7 August 2018, http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2016/06/john-webster-a-testimonial/.

63. Ibid. This assessment (which broadly reflects Webster's own account in Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics") needs to be compared to that of Rowan Williams, who supervised Webster's undergraduate dissertation at Cambridge. According to Williams, from Webster's third (final) year in the Cambridge Theology Tripos, he was "committed to what he called "theological theology," that is, theology which defined its own parameters and methods." (Williams, interview.) If Williams is correct, it does not seem to have taken Webster long to register discomfort with the entire paradigm in which his student education was grounded! However, as will become clear below, Webster himself appears to trace his shift to a "theological theology" approach to later in his career, and it seems likely he may well have picked up the *term* itself from Jüngel. If that is the case, Williams' recollection needs some nuance, especially if Webster did not begin Jüngel studies until his (post)graduate days.

> Barth helped [Webster] to see that theology's starting point could be nothing other than God's own triune self-communication. It was also during this "middle" period that John became familiar with the Yale school, which rightly focused on biblical narrative but tended to focus less on the primacy of God's authorship of and agency in this narrative than on the church's reception of it.[64]

Finally, the "late" period begins with Webster's return to Oxford in 1996. Vanhoozer thinks that "theological theology" was, increasingly, the watchword for this period, as Webster developed his own constructive work in dogmatics.

Michael Allen has proposed a somewhat different periodisation.[65] Allen's work makes particular use of three of Webster's inaugural lectures, at Wycliffe College in 1995,[66] Oxford University in 1997,[67] and the University of St. Andrews in 2014.[68] These lectures, Allen proposes, are "helpful touchpoints for assessing continuities and developments."[69] Allen thus suggests that the last two decades of Webster's career (from 1995) may be divided heuristically into three "phases of his methodological development."[70]

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64. Vanhoozer, "John Webster: A Testimonial." The influence on Webster of the Yale School will be considered in the next section.

65. Allen, "Toward Theological Theology."

66. John Webster, "Reading Theology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 13 (1997).

67. John Webster, *Theological Theology: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 28 October 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), repr. in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, 2nd ed. (2005; repr., London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 11-31. Hereafter, *Confessing God* is *CG*. Page citations for *Theological Theology* are all from *CG*.

68. Published as John Webster, "Intellectual Patience," in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 2, *Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016). Hereafter, *God Without Measure,* volume 2 is *GWM*, 2.

69. Allen, "Toward Theological Theology," 219.

70. Ibid., 220. Allen does not give specific dates for his three "phases." His first phase is linked to Webster's inaugural lectures in both Toronto and Oxford, and seems to date from about 1995 to 2003. His second phase is analysed with reference to two articles from

The first phase (corresponding to the latter half of Webster's time in Ontario) was, according to Allen, one of "principled exposition regarding the nature and practice of theology."[71] In this phase, Webster set out some of the main concerns that would shape the rest of his career, and revealed the influence of his main conversation partners in that endeavour, not least Karl Barth. For Allen, this was the time when Webster

> engaged with classic texts marking the modern tradition of rational inquiry as well as sought to identify ways in which such intellectual habits had infiltrated and permeated much modern divinity. By way of response, he pointed first to a need to fix upon divine agency not only as the object of our inquiry but as the context for such intellectual pursuit and second upon the need to challenge the supposedly universal and objective truths sought by science and to pursue distinctive and competing truths and visions by fixing upon the particular texts of the Christian theological tradition.[72]

Allen identifies three primary concerns of Webster during this first phase: "the distinctiveness of theology amongst the other academic disciplines, the awareness of divergent anthropologies and their effects for self-understanding in intellectual projects of one sort or another, and the need to think of theology in light of God and God's works."[73] A distinctive of these earlier works is their identification of a dual principle for theology: the ontological and the epistemological (or cognitive, or noetic).[74] Webster sometimes explicitly derived these principles from the early Reformed orthodox theologian Johannes Wollebius (1589-1629)[75] but the

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Webster's period of tenure at Aberdeen, published in 2008 and 2009 respectively. His third phase is documented by publications dating from after Webster's move to St Andrews.

71. Ibid., 223.

72. Ibid., 223-24.

73. Ibid., 230.

74. Ibid.

75. Webster, *Theological Theology*, 25. Citing Johannes Wollebius, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. J. W. Beardslee (1760; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 30. In this thesis, the terms "scholasticism" and "orthodoxy" are used interchangeably to refer to "Protestant

dual *principia* was a commonplace in Protestant orthodox system.[76] It is important to see how Webster's understanding in this period of the noetic principle, in particular, is developed in relation to that of Reformed orthodoxy. In "Reading Theology," (1995) Webster expresses his dissatisfaction with Wollebius' approach to the knowledge of God, calling out the latter's "theological failure" to make room for divine presence and action in his account of how human reason moves from Scripture to doctrine.[77] In the light of this negative evaluation, Webster's *approval* of Wollebius on the noetic principle, just two years later, comes as a surprise:

> We would not be far from Wollebius if we were to say that the object of theology is nothing less than the eschatological self-presentation of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Theology is oriented to this active presence, and its enquiries are both materially and formally determined, borne along and corrected by that presence.[78]

What may have led to this apparent *volte-face*? It is just possible that we see here the beginning of perhaps the key material insight that would inform Webster's as yet (1997) unarticulated bibliology, namely that the *very nature* (ontology) of Holy Scripture may only fully be grasped in terms of divine action, and conversely that consideration of Scripture as a "product" is *not* necessarily to lose sight of the divine action by which it comes to be. This insight will be developed in detail later.

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scholasticism." Unless specified, this includes both Reformed and Lutheran varieties. See the terminological discussion in Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally From Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 12. More strictly speaking, "scholasticism" refers to a particular theological method adapted to university education. See the introductory comments in Ryan McGraw, *Reformed Scholasticism: Recovering the Tools of Reformed Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 3.

76. See Richard A. Muller's definition of *Principia theologiae* in Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 245-46.

77. Webster, "Reading Theology," 56-57. "[T]he sheer self-presence of the risen Christ through Scripture's reading in the Church receives scant attention, and doctrinal constructs take over." (Ibid., 57.)

78. Webster, *Theological Theology*, 26.

For now, we may note that it is highly doubtful whether Wollebius could have conceived of his project in terms such as these. Wollebius, in typical Reformed orthodox fashion, clearly understood the *Verbum Dei which is the epistemological foundation of theology* to be, in the first instance, the Bible.[79] As Richard Muller has demonstrated, while the Reformed orthodox operated with a rich and multifaceted understanding of the "Word" of God, they were by no means hesitant to understand Holy Scripture as the cognitive foundation of theology.[80] For all that there is nuance in the orthodox equation of "Word of God" with Holy Scripture (as Muller rightly points out, "this definition does not ultimately function apart from [the] revelatory work of the Son of God, the epistemological focus of Christian theology on Christ, or the Johannine determination of Christ as Word Incarnate"[81]) it remains an unembarrassed equation.[82] As we shall see throughout this thesis, John Webster never makes this equation, despite his broadening sympathies towards orthodoxy more generally.[83] How, then, could Webster suggest that he was following Wollebius

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79. Wollebius, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 30. On the same page as that from which Webster cites in the English translation, Wollebius says, "We [...] acknowledge no other basis for theology than the *written* word of God." Emphasis added.

80. Richard A. Muller, "Christ the Revelation or Revealer? Brunner and Reformed Orthodoxy on the Doctrine of the Word of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26, no. 3 (1983).

81. Ibid., 312.

82. There was therefore no place in Reformed orthodoxy for "principial christocentrism." Richard Muller defines this as, "the understanding of Christ (rather than Scripture and God) as both *principium essendi* and *principium cognoscendi theologiae*." Richard A. Muller, "A Note on 'Christocentrism' and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006), 256. As Muller has argued, "No one in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries ever thought to identify Christ as the *principium cognoscendi theologiae*." (Ibid., 257.)

83. Notwithstanding significant criticisms of the Reformed scholastics in his earlier publications (to be considered below), in his later work, Webster comes to a new, more positive, view of Reformed orthodoxy, including its doctrine of Scripture. Evidence for this may be found in the essays in *The Domain of the Word*, which as Allen notes, "engages those [orthodox] divines in an almost wholly positive light." See Allen, "Toward Theological

on the noetic principle? It is possible, perhaps, to account for his representation of Wollebius in "Theological Theology" as an example of an approach to the Protestant scholastics typical of Karl Barth. As Webster himself notes in his account of *Barth's Earlier Theology*, Barth reworked the epistemological principle to comport with what he identified as the quintessential Reformed insight, that "the event of the Word of God [is] the *viva vox Dei* encountered in Holy Scripture." This is why Barth is "very far indeed from deploying the Scripture principle in such a way that the

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Theology," 226n.

What was the source of Webster's earlier criticisms? In 2015, Webster seems to admit that his earlier (mis-)reading of Reformed orthodoxy was largely shaped by Barth, who was in turn influenced by the reading of Protestant scholasticism mediated to him by Heinrich Heppe. See John Webster, "Ὑπὸ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου Φερόμενοι Ἐλάλησαν Πὸ Θεοῦ Ἄνθρωποι: On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," in *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit: Essays in Honor of Andrew T. Lincoln*, eds. J. G. McConville and L. K. Pietersen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 246. Webster himself had previously followed Heppe's reading of Protestant orthodoxy, as for instance, in Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 31-32. Here, Webster quotes with approval Heppe's criticism of the scholastics: "the "divineness" of Scripture [is] derived purely – not from the participation of its authors in the facts of revelation and God's saving activity, but from the manner of its recording." See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 18. This is a translation of Heinrich Heppe, *Die Dogmatik Der Evangelisch-Reformierten Kirche* (Elberfeld: R.L. Friderichs, 1861).

By 2015, Webster was questioning Heppe's interpretation, and offering his own re-assessment of Barth at this point. In respect of Heppe *et al*, Webster says that the "common claim that such disproportionate attention to inspiration may be found in the post-Reformation divines can scarcely be maintained." See Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 244n. Webster acknowledges the correcting influence at this point of the work of the Lutheran Robert Preus and the Reformed scholar Richard A. Muller. See Robert D. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th-Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2003); Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture*, 2nd ed. (1993; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

Of many possible examples, Francis Turretin (1623-1687) may be cited. For Turretin, Holy Scripture has authority, not primarily as a (formal) function of its inspiration, but due to its material content: "The divine and infallible truth of these books (which have God for their author) is the foundation" of Scripture's authority. Holy Scripture is authoritative and free from error "both as to the things themselves [*res ipsas*] and as to the words [*verba*]." Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 62-63.

Bible *as text* becomes the *principium* of Christianity." Crucially, for Barth, this does not mean that he is breaking faith with his Reformed forebears: "Barth's conception of what it means to be a theologian in the Reformed tradition involves a good deal more that repristination of the steady certainties of orthodoxy. Seeing oneself as part of the Reformed tradition involves taking responsibility for registering the doctrinal and ethical shock of revelation."[84]

Returning to the periodisation of Webster's career, the second (or "middle") phase identified by Allen displayed significant continuities, but there are some new emphases. According to Allen, it is again the principles of theology in respect of which the change may be discerned. In this second phase, Webster distinguishes between the external and internal principle of the *principium cognoscendi*.[85] In an

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84. See John Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies* (London: Continuum, 2005), 46-48, 60.

85. Allen, "Toward Theological Theology," 230.

It will be argued in chapter six below that Webster might have made more of this useful distinction in his bibliology.

Where does the distinction come from? There is some disagreement in the secondary literature as to whether it is truly found prior to Bavinck. Muller's definition of *principia theologiae* referenced above states that in Reformed scholasticism, the *principium cognoscendi* "is sometimes further distinguished into the *principium cognoscendi externum*, the external, written Word, and the *principium cognoscendi internum*, the internal principle of faith which knows the external Word and answers its call, i.e., faith resting on the testimony of the Spirit." Elsewhere, Muller cites Alsted, Maccovius, and van Mastricht as examples of Reformed orthodox theologians who made this distinction. See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics,* vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (1993; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 442n; Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:291-94. However, Muller's position has been convincingly refuted by van den Belt, who demonstrates from his interaction with the primary texts that Muller has overstated his case. See Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 144-46.

Van den Belt takes the point further, showing that Bavinck's development of the dual noetic principle was truly innovative, even as he drew on earlier distinctions: "Bavinck does not copy the tradition, but gives his own interpretation of the terminology." (See ibid., 248. Note also the extended discussion in ibid., 244-48.) A question remains as to why Bavinck seems to give the distinct impression that he *is* following tradition at this point. Van den Belt

essay of 2009,[86] for example, Webster defines the external (objective) cognitive principle as "the Word of God presented through the embassy of the prophets and apostles," and the internal (subjective) cognitive principle as "the redeemed intelligence of the saints."[87] It is significant that in this essay, Webster frequently cites Thomas Aquinas, who came to have a significant influence on his theology.[88] In practice, this new emphasis regarding the *principia* led to (1) a focus on the ontology and function of Scripture, and (2) an increasing sensitivity to the question of the virtues necessary for the right apprehension of the Word of God.

In the third phase of Webster's methodological development, Allen argues that "Webster both returned to earlier concerns – theological theology again – as well as further developed areas of inquiry that were relatively underdeveloped in his methodological *oeuvre*, specifically, the virtues and vices of human theological inquiry."[89] It is in this third and final phase of Webster's career that he changed

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considers the (admittedly unlikely) possibility that Bavinck was "not fully aware of the discontinuity because he interprets the Reformed tradition from the perspective of modernity and finds a tool in the distinction of the *principium externum* and the *principium internum* to deal with the object-subject dichotomy." Nevertheless, his preferred – if rather more provocative – explanation is that Bavinck *deliberately* presents his material as traditional and uncontroversial (knowing that it is in fact not), as he "fences his position off from subjectivism." (Ibid., 248-49.)

86. John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 1 (2009), 56-71, repr. in *DoW*, 133-49.

87. Ibid., 135.

88. In a review of the two volumes of Webster's *God Without Measure*, Willem Maarten Dekker asserts that, "Aquinas is the most quoted theologian in these two volumes. In essence, Webster's theology is based on Aquinas." An acknowledgment of Aquinas' influence is surely indisputable, but Dekker overstates the case, given the variety of other influences, and some notable departures from Aquinas, to be considered below. See Willem Maarten Dekker, "John Webster's Retrieval of Classical Theology," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12, no. 1 (2018), 61.

89. Allen, "Toward Theological Theology," 231.

significantly his evaluation of the Protestant scholastics, and engaged extensively with Aquinas. Notably, in this third phase, Webster

> intensifies the discussion of the aseity of God by unpacking the triune processions and missions, not only in the doctrine of God but at every point in talking about the economy as flowing from and expressive of those intra-divine relations. The third phase also furthers the specific attention given to the creaturely fruits of God's gracious labors, wherein creatures are fit for virtue and called to contemplation of the Godhead. In each of these elaborations, Webster's engagement with the patristic, medieval, and post-Reformation traditions shows itself to be significant, as his conversation partners have extended catholically and, even within his own Reformed tradition, taken in the early Reformed resources (not shirking Barth, to be sure, but situating or relativizing him, to some extent, amongst earlier figures and texts) from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[90]

What should we make of these two periodisations of Webster's career? First, although they are different, we need not be forced to choose between them. Allen's version only begins in the 1990s, halfway through Vanhoozer's "middle" period. Vanhoozer thus helps us to see the relative significance of Webster's early development, especially before he went to Canada. Allen's version, however, has the benefit of analysing the "later" Webster in terms of more than one period, which is useful in order to account for his oft-noted methodological "turn" to Aquinas and the scholastic theologians, the formal move to a more explicit and resolute beginning of all theological work with God *a se*, and the material development of the doctrines of creation and creaturely intelligence.

Any "periodisation" of Webster's career perhaps suffers from the weakness of creating the impression that his development happened in fits and starts rather than incrementally. We have seen Rowan Williams' impression that "theological theology" was a perennial concern of Webster's from as early as his undergraduate

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90. Ibid., 236. The language of "processions" and "missions" in particular is evidently drawn from Aquinas. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (London: Blackfriars, 1964), 1a. 27, 43.

days, even if it was not couched in such terms until later on. Also, a point to be developed in what follows is that there is no simple transition from Barth to scholasticism (of the Thomist or Protestant orthodox variety) in Webster's later work. Indeed, there was a persistently-evident "Barthian twist," despite Webster's increasing debt to Aquinas and the Reformed scholastic theologians.

Notwithstanding the above caveats, in this thesis an heuristic distinction is proposed between the "earlier" and "later" John Webster. Since the focus will primarily be on Webster's constructive theology, the "earlier" Webster refers roughly to the period represented by the essays in *Word and Church* (2001) and *Confessing God* (2005), including the monographs of this period.[91] The "later" Webster refers to the essays in *The Domain of the Word* (2012) and the two volumes of *God Without Measure* (2016).[92] Although this thesis does not stand or fall on the earlier/later distinction, it will be an important aspect of the descriptive material that follows.[93] The distinction will be clarified and defended here in terms of a turn *from* Barth *to* Aquinas and the Reformed scholastics. Apart from Webster's own work, perhaps the most useful (albeit indirect) source for tracing this "turn" is the recently-published book by Tyler Wittman, based on his doctoral thesis.[94] This book is not an analysis of

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91. Webster suggests that even between these two volumes, there were some significant developments. In *W&C,* Webster also tended to follow Barth in (i) the latter's "emphasis upon the sheer difference between God and the world," (ii) "what was said about the invasiveness of divine revelation, or about the utterly gratuitous origin of ecclesial and moral existence." See Webster, *CG*, ix.

92. Although the publication date of both volumes of *GWM* is 2016, they were available from 19 November 2015, six months before Webster's death.

93. The distinction itself, though not recognised in these terms by all Webster interpreters, is uncontroversial. Sanders, for one, similarly describes the "later" Webster as "the prolonged phase of [Webster's] self-imposed re-education." Sanders thinks this phase would have been a transition "toward something astonishingly rich," had Webster lived. See Sanders, "John Webster's Trinitarian Doctrine of Scripture," 4-5.

94. See Tyler Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Wittman's thesis was supervised by

Webster's own theological development, but it bears the marks of Webster's influence throughout, and is particularly helpful for discerning (i) the nature of the limitations in Barth that the later Webster recognised, as well as (ii) the strengths that Webster came to appreciate in the scholastic doctrine of God and approach to the theological task. Some of the claims made in subsequent chapters (especially chapter three) depend on Wittman's readings of Barth and Aquinas, where these seem to offer insights into the direction of Webster's thinking. Of course, it is not possible to be certain that Webster and Wittman are always of one mind, and so some of the suggestions about how Webster understood these thinkers are necessarily more tentative, where they cannot be substantiated by Webster's own writings.

1.5 Audience and Interlocutors

Our last task by way of general introduction is to consider Webster's theological audience. For whom did he write? And who was listening/reading? Brad East identifies liberal and Reformed Protestants as Webster's "two primary spheres, whether of influence or of interlocution."[95] This is probably a fair assessment. But as a recent article by Fergus Kerr notes, Webster's later work was filled with appreciative (if at times critical) references to, and sometimes detailed interaction

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Webster. There is no doubting Wittman's familiarity with Webster's work. His "scrupulous attentions" in the preparation of Webster's essays for publication are acknowledged by Webster himself in John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *God and the Works of God* (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), vii. Hereafter, *God Without Measure,* volume 1 is *GWM*, 1. See also Webster, *GWM*, 2:vi.

95. East, "The Church's Book," 111. By "Reformed," East presumably implies a more conservative position than "liberal."

with, Roman Catholic writers – and not just Thomas Aquinas![96] Webster is often recognised as a Barthian scholar, not just because of his important work in Barth interpretation, but due to emphases in his own constructive work that reflect Barth in different ways. However, Webster certainly (and particularly in his later years) blazed his own trail and cannot simply be typecast as "Barthian."

Webster attracted great appreciation from a Reformed evangelical constituency, particularly in North America.[97] In the U.K., also, Webster was warmly received in some conservative evangelical circles, as evidenced by the commendation from Dominic Smart in Webster's collection of published sermons.[98] He has been hailed by some of those involved in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) movement as an important influence, despite receiving some criticism from certain of its exponents, and indeed registering some caution himself in respect of TIS.[99]

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96. Fergus Kerr, "John Webster and Catholic Theology," *New Blackfriars* 98, no. 1076 (2017). See also interaction with Webster's doctrine of Scripture by Roman Catholic scholars Matthew Levering and Gavin D'Costa in Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014); Gavin D'Costa, "Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster's Conception of Holy Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 4 (2004); Gavin D'Costa, "Book Review: John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge, 2003)," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 4 (2007).

97. For example, Kevin Vanhoozer, who called Webster "the greatest living theologian – the best theologian on earth" (Vanhoozer, "John Webster: A Testimonial.") and Michael Horton, for whom Webster was "the first name I suggested to aspiring doctoral students." See Michael Horton, "In Memoriam: John Bainbridge Webster (1955-2016)," (2016): accessed 8 August 2018, https://www.whitehorseinn.org/2016/05/in-memoriam-john-bainbridge-webster-1955-2016/.

98. John Webster, *The Grace of Truth*, ed. Daniel Bush and Brannon Ellis (Farmington: Oil Lamp, 2011). Smart was, until 2013, minister of Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen, a conservative evangelical congregation which left the national Church of Scotland in 2011. Other notable evangelicals who wrote commendations for *The Grace of Truth* include Michael Horton, Graeme Goldsworthy, Donald Macleod, Stephen Holmes, Steven Roy, and Andrew McGowan.

99. One of the most illuminating of Webster's definitions of TIS is found in Webster, *GWM*, 1:59. There, Webster writes that "theological interpretation is characterized by a particular

Critical biblical scholars have not yet much engaged with Webster's doctrine of Scripture, but there has been some implicit challenging of his position.[100]

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understanding of the origin and nature of the biblical texts, of the situation and calling of their interpreters, of the interpretative acts which most fittingly correspond to the nature of the Bible, and of the ends which such acts serve." These are, in fact, the principal concerns of Webster's bibliology, to be explored in detail in chapter four below.

For Webster's concerns about TIS, see his cautionary comments in Webster, *DoW*, 32-33. In an interview from 2008, Webster's response to the question, "What current trends in theology give you hope?" began with a reference to "Theological interpretation of scripture (when it is not burdened by large-scale hermeneutical theory or an inflated ecclesiology)." See John Webster and Jason Byassee, "An Interview with John Webster," *The Christian Century* (2008): accessed 24 September 2018, https://www.religion-online.org/article/an-interview-with-john-webster/.

The description of TIS as a "movement" is unlikely to be acceptable to all, given that even one of its more enthusiastic proponents can describe it as "a large and somewhat chaotic party." See Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), x. Fowl's final chapter ("Guests at a Party") follows this analogy, and introduces readers to various other party "guests," not least of whom is John Webster – one of Fowl's "other interesting and interested parties." (Ibid., 88.) As an aside, talk of "parties" at "parties" is only likely to increase the conversational chaos Fowl identifies – at least for his readers! The appropriateness of the descriptor "movement" has recently been challenged in Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6. Sarisky prefers "debate" or "discussion."

One Old Testament scholar who has expressed reservations about Webster's bibliology is Walter Moberly. In 2010 Moberly complained that Webster "can write extensively about the nature of Scripture with no attempt to show the difference that his account can make in practice." See R. W. L. Moberly, "What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (2009), 169. Webster, Moberly says, "neither pays attention to the concrete particularities of the diverse books that constitute the Bible nor discusses any of the hard passages that have so often made exegetes uncomfortable with dogmatic accounts of Scripture." (Ibid., 170.)

A similar complaint comes from New Testament scholar N. T. Wright. According to Wright, the reader of Webster's *Dogmatic Sketch* "would never have known, from reading this book, anything at all about what the Bible contains." Wright continues (in mildly sardonic tone), "[S]ince [Webster's] thesis is that scripture is the central source for all Christian thinking, it might have been appropriate (and not beyond the wit of such a fine scholar) to base this contention, too, on scripture itself." See Tom Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*, 2nd revised and expanded ed. (2005; repr., San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013), 12-13. Arguments such as those of Moberly and Wright will be addressed below.

100. An example is the sharply contrasting approach of Webster's Oxford colleague John

1.6 Conclusion

Attention to context is important in this study because the relationship between the theologian and his theology is demonstrably *not* like Webster's understanding of the relationship between Creator and creatures that will be articulated in the chapters to follow. There is no "Webster *in se*," from whom theology derives as it were *ex nihilo*. Rather, it has been suggested here that Webster's theology was shaped formally and materially in important ways by his own settings and influences. A summary of such influences must include at least the following elements: (i) Webster's extreme introversion and even reclusiveness seem to have spurred him to develop themes of contemplation, the *visio Dei*, and the human soul before God in his later work; (ii) Webster's experience of strained and broken relationships probably contributed to his sense of being an outsider in the various contexts in which he served; (iii) Webster loved the church, and understood his work as pre-eminently a churchly vocation, but his own experience of church life was complicated and sometimes fraught with difficulty; (iv) Webster expressed frustration and impatience with the university as a locus of theological education, but he persevered in university contexts throughout most of his working life; (v) Webster, perhaps to his own surprise, engendered a loyal following in certain constituencies of the church and the academy with whom he remained in friendly, fraternal dialogue, even as he positioned himself in a more confrontational relationship with other constituencies, less amenable to his concerns.[101] In the next

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Barton, to be discussed below.

[101.] This thesis is not the first attempt to draw connections between Webster's life and his work, even if it is the most developed to date. For example, Kenneth Oakes suggests that "Webster's work is certainly and uniquely his own, and readily identifiable with his personality." Oakes observes that Webster's "style was distinctive and cultivated but without the typically attendant idiosyncrasy which can prevent one's work from being received and productive beyond the force of personal charism." Further, Oakes finds the frequent "commendations of indication, of witnessing and testifying to the 'utter plenitude' of the

chapter, the focus broadens to a consideration of the wider intellectual context in which Webster's theological work developed.

Father, Son and Spirit" in Webster's essays in *God Without Measure* to be "one of the animating and constant forces of both Webster's work and his life." See Kenneth Oakes, "Theology, Economy and Christology in John Webster's *God Without Measure* and Some Earlier Works," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, no. 4 (2017), 504.

In her inimitable style, Katherine Sonderegger notes Webster's "constrained lyricism," finding in his work an "unbridled spiritual exuberance that Webster cherishes but seems not to take as his own" (in this instance, the poet Thomas Traherne) and concludes that, in view of his precise and economical prose, "[a]s a musical genre, Webster is not Schubert." See Sonderegger, "God-Intoxicated Theology," 25-26. Sonderegger interprets these aspects of Webster's work as deriving from his doctrine of God itself. The suggestion here is that there is an interplay with more personal, idiosyncratic factors.

§ 2. John Webster's Theological Project: A Contextual Summary

2.1 Introduction

In the broadest terms, John Webster's theological project may be characterised as a response to the perceived problems of *modernity* (material and formal) by means of a (methodological) retrieval of *premodern* theological resources, articulated in and for a *postmodern* context.[1] Even if this characterisation is inappropriate[2] – and of course it remains to be demonstrated – it indicates what is surely beyond dispute, namely that Webster's project may be analysed and evaluated in (i) *material*, (ii) *formal*, and (iii) *methodological* terms. Analysis begins in this chapter: a full-scale evaluation will await discussion of his doctrine of Scripture in due course.

As indicated in the previous chapter, there is also a diachronic aspect to Webster's project which must be taken seriously if he is to be interpreted correctly. It is by no means simple to offer an account of Webster's work which is at once sensitive to both diachronic and synchronic concerns. This chapter proposes an account of Webster's work that assumes an *evolution* and *development* of themes and sources, in the context of an overall *continuity* of purpose.[3] The account will

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1. The terms "modern," "premodern," and "postmodern" will be explained and used in this chapter as Webster himself uses them. At this point, the purpose is *descriptive*: we are not yet asking whether Webster is *correct* in the way he describes and evaluates these intellectual traditions and contexts.

2. In a similar assessment, Katherine Sonderegger describes Webster as "a modern theologian in a distinctive mode: of *ressourcement*." See ibid., 24. Sonderegger also says that Webster "takes up the neuralgic metaphysical challenges directly, not flinching at the sheer cliff face of modern and postmodern critical philosophy." (Ibid., 40.)

3. This approach is vindicated by Webster's own assessment of his development. For example, in his preface to *The Domain of the Word* (2012) Webster suggests that readers familiar with his earlier work "may notice some changes of emphasis and idiom in the

proceed by examining, in turn, Webster's relationship to "modernity," "premodernity," and "postmodernity." Having established this framework as an approach to Webster's theological project in general, the next chapter will explore how Webster parses the Creator-creature relation and "revelation" in particular.

2.2 Modernity

Webster's early studies in the German theologians Wolfhart Pannenberg and Eberhard Jüngel led him, along with these thinkers, to question some of the key assumptions of "modernity," and in particular the whole tradition of western thought shaped by Immanuel Kant.[4] Webster recounts his encounter at Cambridge

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present volume," rather than a fundamental change of direction. (Webster, *DoW*, vii.)

In his preface to the second edition of *Word and Church* (2015) Webster reflects on a collection of his essays which were originally published in the years 1997-2001. While noting some "retractions," Webster writes that "there is much in what follows which continues to shape my work in the present." In addition, he remarks on matters of context that, "[w]ith a few exceptions, the state of systematic theology in Britain remains largely what it was when these essays were written." (Webster, *W&C*, xii.)

Likewise, in the preface to the second edition of *Confessing God* (also 2015) Webster introduces his essays from 1998-2005 by telling readers that "[i]n many respects, they are continuous with earlier work," and also that, while there are "things which ought to have been said or said better," the essays nevertheless retain value as "working papers, on the way to something else." (Webster, *CG*, ix-x.)

4. "Modernity" is in quotation marks here to indicate that we are concerned with *Webster's* use of the term, while recognising, with Matthew Lauzon, that "[t]he related terms *modern* and *modernity* are notoriously wooly words with contested chronologies and debated definitions." On the premise that there are what Lauzon and others have referred to as "multiple modernities," Webster might be faulted for a critique of "modernity" that is too monolithic or reductionistic, especially since he remains in certain key respects (to be discussed below) a distinctively "modern" theologian. See Matthew J. Lauzon, "Modernity," in *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 72.

Of course, Webster himself was not unaware of the difficulties in invoking modernity, "itself a complex evaluative construct." (See Webster, *Barth*, 167.) What Webster seems to have had in mind in his critique is a particular intellectual paradigm shaped by Cartesian and Kantian thought: we might call this an "Enlightenment" paradigm. In its strict separation of the human and the divine, it is similar to the "Enlightenment Epicureanism" which has been

with an approach to systematic theology which was focused on "problems, particularly the problems faced by those who felt acutely responsible to do their theology under the bleak searchlights of what were taken to be normative modern intellectual developments."[5] For Webster, interaction with Jüngel offered his first deep-level exposure to a theologian who protested against this modern, Cartesian approach, and argued for the primacy of *theological* confession, in the light of what had become an "internally corrupt" theological tradition without "access to the resources needed to maintain integrity under interrogation."[6]

Webster engages critically with modernity in many of his essays and monographs from his earliest work: perhaps the classic text is, however, his inaugural lecture before the University of Oxford, "Theological Theology."[7] Webster

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subjected to sustained criticism by (among others) N. T. Wright. See, for example, Wright's 2018 Gifford Lectures, forthcoming as N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (London: SPCK, 2019).

5. Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics," 129.

6. See John Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, eds. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain R. Torrance (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 587.

7. Webster, *Theological Theology*, in *CG*, 11-31.

The precise origin of the phrase "theological theology" is not entirely clear. Certainly, Webster was not the first to use the formula, although he may have coined it more-or-less independently. A possible source is a 1982 essay on Luther by Ingolf Dalferth, which uses the phrase in its title, and is cited in John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 177. See I. U. Dalferth, "The Visible and the Invisible: Luther's Legacy of A Theological Theology," in *England and Germany: Studies in Theological Diplomacy*, ed. Stephen Sykes (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1982). Or, perhaps Webster picked up the phrase from Jüngel, whom he cites in John Webster, ed. *The Possibilities of Theology: Studies in the Theology of Eberhard Jüngel in His Sixtieth Year*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 109. Writing of Jüngel's work, *God as the Mystery of the World* (1976), Webster says, "it is clear that for Jüngel modernity constitutes not so much a call to apologetics as 'an opportunity for a more theological theology.'" Jüngel's original had "*theologischeren Theologie*." The translation is Webster's own, and differs from the published English translation (1983) only in the addition of the indefinite article to "more theological theology." See the original: Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott Als Geheimnis Der Welt: Zur Begründung Der Theologie Des Gekreuzigten Im Streit Zwischen Theismus Und Atheismus*,

begins that lecture with an assessment of the position of theology in Western universities: "sometimes encouraged, occasionally attacked, it is most often treated with a benign indifference."[8] This state of affairs has come about, he says, because of the widespread acceptance in scholarly communities of certain "conventions" which have shown their effectiveness, particularly in the natural and social sciences, even while their universal application and normativity is at best questionable. At the root of these conventions, Webster thinks, is an "anthropology of enquiry" which is "bound up with some of the most potent moral and spiritual ideals of modernity." To offer a brief sketch of this anthropology, it is predicated on the neutrality of the researcher, the absence of preconvictions, and the "inwardness" or "interiority" of human intellectual activity, so that the "enquiring self" becomes sovereign in exercising reason.

The point of this analysis of the contemporary university is to underline its general inhospitality towards "theological enquiry informed by Christian conviction." The failure of theology as a discipline to respond to its context Webster puts down in part to the success of the university in articulating its position, but in part also to "a certain failure of theological nerve." Indeed, "the history of modern theology can [...] be read as its steady alienation from its own subject matter and procedures," a judgment in respect of which Webster locates blame at least as much within the discipline as without.

In another essay from 1998, Webster laments theology's captivity to modernity. He asks: "Is not 'modern' as a qualifier of 'theology' often deployed in

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3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977), 3. The most recent English reprint is Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (1983; repr., London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 4.

8. The following summary follows the argument on pages 12-17 of the reprinted lecture in *CG*.

such a way as to suggest that it is the predicate which is granted priority over the substantive – that the character of 'modernity' has a given, almost fatal, character, such that it entirely conditions theological work?"[9] It would not be an overstatement to suggest that Webster believes modernity has emasculated or eviscerated Christian dogmatics. Deprived of its native vocabulary, theology has found itself beholden to other disciplines or confined by the straitjacket of general theories. Webster refers to this as the "decline of theology."[10]

It should be noted at this point that, for all his criticisms of "modernity," some have argued that John Webster was nevertheless a distinctly "modern" theologian in certain respects.[11] Some of Webster's "modern" distinctives will be explored in more depth below, but at this stage, we may note those identified by Katherine Sonderegger – for whom Webster is "an exemplary *modern* theologian"[12] – in the following ways: (1) Webster draws on the resources of the whole Christian tradition with an eye to the diagnosis of peculiarly *modern* problems;[13] (2) he argues the knowledge of God comes from God's own "[s]elf-demonstration" of *who* God is, and so we should therefore not be so concerned with God's quiddity;[14] (3) he "holds that the Doctrine of God is 'self-involving'," by which

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9. John Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), repr. in *W&C*, 48.

10. Ibid., 49.

11. There were some senses, at least, in which Webster was not "modern." In an online tribute to Webster after his death, Steve Holmes reveals that Webster "was perhaps a little remote from the modern world (he wrote his publications longhand with a fountain pen, then typed them into a computer when finished for editors who demanded electronic copy)"! See Steve Holmes, "In Memoriam John Webster," (2016): accessed 25 March 2019, http://steverholmes.org.uk/blog/?p=7616.

12. Sonderegger, "God-Intoxicated Theology," 26. Emphasis original.

13. Ibid. Developing Webster's own metaphor of modernity's "pathology," Sonderegger suggests that Webster "focuses intently upon the modern patient." (Ibid., 28.)

14. Ibid., 29-30. As we shall see below, this is a particularly modern notion. Sonderegger

Sonderegger refers to the implication that the human knowing subject must necessarily be caught up in the reality of the God who is known: this is Webster's "existential moment";[15] (4) he insists that "faith is its own epistemic ground," so that creatures know God on the basis of God's gracious presence, on the principle that "to attend to a person is itself person-forming";[16] (5) description of God, for Webster, is "concrete": what he offers us is thus an account of "[t]he stunning Personal Positivity of God."[17]

Once again, to a certain extent "modernity" is in the eye of the beholder. Sonderegger's account of Webster's "modernity" depends on her definition of what constitutes "modern" theology.[18] However, Sonderegger has surely identified some aspects of Webster's work that simply could not have been penned for most of the last two millennia, because the issues with which he deals (and the frame of reference in which he discusses them) were *unknown*. In this sense Webster is undoubtedly modern. Nevertheless, in setting his own project over against "modernity" – and in opposition to a way of doing theology that has allegedly capitulated to a "modern" paradigm – Webster came to identify two main problems in that tradition as he interpreted it, one material, the other formal. This section

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finds it in Barth and Jenson in particular.

15. Ibid., 34.

16. Ibid., 35.

17. Ibid., 36-37. The language is Sonderegger's.

18. For some alternative definitions, see Gareth Jones, "Preface," in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Garrett Green, "Modernity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). For Jones, "modern theology begins when theologians look beyond the Church for answers to their questions." (Jones, "Preface," xiii.) For Green, similarly, modernity is "an attempt to ground religion itself in a new way, to build culture on a new and modern foundation and to know God and to justify belief in him without recourse to the authoritarianism of the previous age." (Green, "Modernity," 163.)

summarises these problems, and the respective solutions that Webster proposed to each.[19]

2.2.1 Modernity's Material Problem

In Webster's view, the most important *material* problem with modernity is its rejection of the transcendent and metaphysical in favour of exclusively natural causal explanation.[20] This sets up a dualism at the heart of modernity. Within the modern paradigm, such a move made a certain sense. Immanuel Kant had argued that the human active intellect imposes its categories on the phenomenal world, and so in this world there is no place for divine activity.[21] "God" was confined by Kant

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19. I am indebted to Carlton Wynne for suggesting this way of framing Webster's concerns. The structure of the following argument is developed from a series of lectures and seminars given by Dr Wynne on "New Modernity" at Pastors' Academy, London, in June 2018.
It should be noted here that one late, enigmatic comment by Webster suggests that he may have become less sanguine about what Sonderegger calls "therapeutic analysis" of modernity's ills. (Sonderegger, "God-Intoxicated Theology," 28.) Webster writes: "By attentive return to the sources, we may recover much that has been lost [...] without recourse to a tragic reading of modernity which can discourage theology from calm deployment of its own resources in making sense of where it is and how it might best proceed." See Webster, *DoW*, 123-24. Did Webster come to think that his earlier work represented such a "tragic reading of modernity"? We cannot be sure, but it is probably fair to say that the emphasis in his later work is more firmly on the positive, material task of dogmatics, and the critique of modernity is less to the fore than it was in the essays in *Confessing God*.

20. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 18-20.

21. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
For Mark Alan Bowald – who is sympathetic to Webster – Kant is representative of the Enlightenment paradigm, in his attempt to remove the knowing human subject from the influence of all antecedent judgments. See Bowald's account of Kant in Mark Alan Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (London: Routledge, 2007), 4-8. Given that Kant's purpose is to ground human freedom, it is ironic that he aims to set aside "the prior and concurrent action of the Triune God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer." (Ibid., 9.) As Bowald notices, loss of the first and third of these means "the negation or cessation of our existence," while separation from the second entails

and his followers to the realm of the noumenal, and was not considered necessary to human knowledge of the world of phenomena.[22] Protestant theology came to be deeply influenced by Kant, especially through Kant's contemporary, Friedrich

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slavery rather than freedom. Bowald also observes that Kant prefers "notional" judgments about God to "operational" judgments. In other words, a doctrine about God that can be kept at arm's-length from the immanent experience of the human subject is preferable to one that suggests God's involvement in the present world order.

22. Webster does not engage Kant extensively, although when the philosopher of Königsberg does feature in Webster's work it is almost always in a negative context. For Webster, Kant is guilty of propounding "one of the greatest myths of modernity" in his opposition of "enlightenment" to "tutelage." See Webster, *Theological Theology*, repr. in *CG*, 17. A similar critique is put forward in John Webster, "On the Theology of the Intellectual Life," in *Christ Across the Disciplines: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), repr. in *GWM*, 2:153. Kant's understanding of "free enquiry" is, unsurprisingly, seen by Webster to have contributed to the rise of critical methods in biblical studies. See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 110. Elsewhere, Webster criticises Kant's anthropology, particularly his insistence on *autonomy* as that which grounds the dignity of human nature. See John Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures," in *The God of Love and Human Dignity*, ed. Paul Middleton (London: T&T Clark, 2007), repr. in *GWM*, 2:35-36. Webster also finds fault with Kant's failure to ground the holiness of God in soteriology, and therefore God's *relatedness*, as opposed to mere moral purity. See Webster, *Holiness*, 47. But perhaps Webster's most significant criticism of Kant in his later work concerns the latter's influence on subsequent theology's *order*. As we will see below, Webster laments the fact that much modern theology is effectively reduced to Christology, so that "the space between God absolutely considered and God relatively considered" is closed. In Webster's estimation, one contributing factor to this state of affairs is "Kant's placing of the noumenal beyond the reach of the human intellect." See John Webster, "The Place of Christology in Systematic Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca A. Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), repr. as "Christology, Theology, Economy. The Place of Christology in Systematic Theology," in *GWM,* 1:53-54. Even in his later writing, Webster affirms that the work of the Son of God in history must receive due attention, but neither because "theology remains abstract or merely noumenal until its historical force is registered," nor because of "any supposed restriction of human knowledge and experience to the phenomenal realm which necessitates attention to the economy, as if that realm were more immediately accessible." (Ibid., 51.) A similar critique appears in John Webster, "*Rector Et Iudex Super Omnia Genera Doctrinarum*? The Place of the Doctrine of Justification," in *What is Justification About? Reformed Contributions to an Ecumenical Theme*, eds. Michael Weinrich and John P. Burgess (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), repr. in *GWM*, 1:161-162. Here, Webster laments the misplacement of soteriology at the material centre of dogmatics, particularly "in the wake of Kant, where the severe restrictions placed upon the reach of the mind encouraged some theologians to divert towards 'promeity'."

Schleiermacher, the "pioneer of modern theology."[23] Editor and translator Richard Crouter describes Schleiermacher's *On Religion* (1799) as "the premier expression of an understanding of religion as rooted in immediate pre-reflexive feeling and intuition, and only secondarily at the level of intellectual cognition or in moral systems and deeds."[24] In both *On Religion* and Schleiermacher's *magnum opus* – his *Glaubenslehre* – "religion arises from immediate self-consciousness."[25] This human consciousness of the existence of absoluteness is a path of revelation, apprehended by feeling (*Gefühl*), especially the supposedly universal feeling of "absolute dependence" (*schlechthinniger Abhängingkeit*).[26] By rejecting reason or thinking

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23. This description of Schleiermacher is from Keith W. Clements, ed., *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology* (London: Collins, 1987), 7. The precise relationship between the thought of Kant and that of Schleiermacher is debated. Crouter argues that the "Kantian dichotomy" between the noumenal and the phenomenal was "too great for Schleiermacher," given the latter's commitment to philosophical realism. For Crouter, Schleiermacher must therefore be interpreted as trying to find a way to hold together aspects of critical philosophy with Romanticism. See Crouter's introduction to Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xxix.

24. Ibid., xi.

25. Ibid. The most recent critical edition of the *Glaubenslehre* in English is Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, eds. Terrence N. Tice and Catherine L. Kelsey, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey, and Edwina Lawler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

26. As is the case with Kant, Webster does not offer a detailed interaction with Schleiermacher. He repeats Barth's critique of Schleiermacher's non-referential hermeneutics in John Webster, "Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer," in *W&C*, 94. A similar point, this time about Schleiermacher's hermeneutical subjectivity, is made (following T. F. Torrance) in John Webster, "T. F. Torrance on Scripture," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65 (2012), repr. as "*Verbum Mirificum*: T. F. Torrance on Scripture and Hermeneutics," in *DoW*, 107n. Webster criticises Schleiermacher's approach to the theological task more generally in Webster, *Theological Theology*, in *CG*, 17. He also registers his disapproval of Schleiermacher's lack of a theology of divine perfections in John Webster, "On the Theology of Providence," in *The Providence of God*, eds. Francesca A. Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler (London: T&T Clark, 2009), repr. in *GWM*, 1:130. Perhaps most significantly for the present study, Webster takes Schleiermacher to task for his "subjective" approach to the knowledge of God. Webster cites the *Glaubenslehre*: "All

(and acting) as means of epistemological access to the noumenal world, Schleiermacher effectively accepted the central argument of Kant's critique, and paved the way for the repudiation of the objectivity of metaphysics.

Henceforth, if metaphysical claims were to be received in the academy, they would require some kind of "critical" justification, tested against "independent criteria."[27] Such a philosophical justification might take the form of German idealism, with its claim that consciousness *is* reality. Or it might follow the path taken by classic liberal theology, locating the allegedly "independent criteria" in *Gefühl* or some other kind of human experience. Webster refers to these intellectual (and, he would insist, *spiritual*) trends as the "naturalisation"[28] of theology, or, simply, "naturalism."[29]

This "naturalism" affected theology principally in that the "elements of the biblical economy" came to be privileged over any attempt to "trace those elements to

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attributes which we ascribe to God are to be taken as denoting not something special in God, but only something special in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to Him." While recognising that Schleiermacher's "famous definition" has an "indisputably praiseworthy" motive, namely, to focus on the "soteriological import" of God's attributes, Webster argues that

> [this] undertaking quickly unravels. For where Schleiermacher was cautiously referential [Here, Webster nods in the direction of Schleiermacher's realism, noted above as recognised by Crouter, although as Webster's footnote makes clear, he is not convinced by the argument of Ebeling and others that Schleiermacher is "relational" rather than "subjective"], his heirs have often become nominalist, even sceptical. When the divine attributes become ways of characterizing religious apprehensions of the divine [...] then God's own being is at best left indefinite, and at worst becomes a blank, a void which we then have busily to fill with ideas of our own invention. (Webster, *Holiness*, 44 and 44n.)

27. Webster, *W&C*, 125.

28. See, for example, Webster, *DoW*, vii. In this particular instance, the spelling is "naturalization."

29. Ibid., ix.

their cause in the fullness of God's own life."[30] The result was that such "elements" came to be viewed in detachment from their "principles."[31] As Kevin Vanhoozer memorably puts it, "theology under the house arrest of modernity was not allowed to make claims that transcended human spatiotemporal experience."[32] Webster observes in a number of his essays how this fateful modern commitment worked itself out across the theological encyclopaedia. For example, in respect of Christology he avers that modernity worked on the "assumption that Jesus is not a presently active figure but simply a figure from the past."[33] In other words, modernity's "Jesus" was, in effect, an historically-accessible and rationally-apprehendable phenomenon. Any metaphysical claims that might be made about him beyond this depended on one's prior philosophical commitments (either to idealism, or else to what Barth called "consciousness theology") and emphatically *could not* depend on church doctrine.

In a general introduction to the textbook he co-edited in 2007, *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, Webster sheds light on what he finds most objectionable in theology done under the influence of Kant and Hegel.[34] In such theology, "Christian reality claims are taken to be 'symbolic', non-final though not, of course, unnecessary expressions of something anterior."[35] Webster traces this approach to (i) the "appeal to natural religion and morality as anterior (and in

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30. Ibid., viii.

31. Ibid., vii-viii.

32. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Analytics, Poetics, and the Mission of Dogmatic Discourse," in *The Task of Dogmatics: Explorations in Theological Method*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 28.

33. Webster, *W&C*, 115.

34. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain R. Torrance, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

35. John Webster, "Introduction: Systematic Theology," in ibid., 10.

important ways superior) to positive theological teaching," and (ii) the "development of idealist interpretations of Christian teaching [...] in which the capacity of doctrines to act as incitements to moral performance was considered to be largely independent of their reference to reality."[36] A "symbolic" understanding of Christian reality claims leads the dogmatician to seek to transpose such claims (in Hegelian terms) "from the realm of *Vorstellung* (representation) to that of *Begriff* (concept)."[37]

For Webster, the Kantian paradigm – in both its idealist and liberal inflections – presupposes a distinctively modern error, namely, the assumption that any transcendent activity in the world (*e.g.* of God, if he is understood in transcendent terms) is necessarily a violation of creaturely integrity.[38] A transcendent, sovereign God, the moderns claimed, threatened a breakdown – a sort of "disestablishment" – of creaturely reality, especially the reality of human moral agency and responsibility. Moderns thus tended to posit a competitive relation between God and the world. The modern solution to this apparent dilemma was twofold: either to separate God and the world into two sealed-off spheres,[39] or else to

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36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 11. In his introduction to the thought of Hegel from a Reformed perspective, Shao Kai Tseng illustrates how Hegel's philosophy leads to a demythologising approach to the Bible, "the value of which lies not in the historicity of the events that it claims to report [*Vorstellung*], but in the *concept* [*Begriff*], the pure truth, that the historically incredible tales aim to convey." David Strauss exemplifies this kind of approach. See Shao Kai Tseng, *G. W. F. Hegel* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2018), 114.

38. See, for example, Webster's argument that modernity operated according to a "metaphysical principle which separated the sensible and supra-sensible realms, and which considered that historical accidentals cannot be the bearers of non-contingent truths." (Webster, *W&C*, 131.) The implications of this principle for modernity's doctrine of Scripture may be immediately apparent: they will be assessed in detail below.

39. The "supposition that the properties of natural realities can be grasped without reference to createdness, and that only when so grasped can natural realities protect their integrity," is, for Webster, a "misstep." (Webster, *DoW*, ix.)

immanentise God so that he became in some way conditioned or even realised by and through the creation. Whichever path was taken, the effect was to remove the *sovereign* agency of God from the world of experience, a move of supposed necessity if creaturely integrity were to be maintained. Everything experienced in the world could therefore be accounted for in terms of natural laws and causality.[40]

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40. Webster was not, of course, the first to formulate such a critical assessment of modernity. The view outlined above bears comparison with that of the Roman Catholic scholar Erich Pryzywara, which is summarised by Bruce McCormack in Bruce L. McCormack, "Karl Barth's Version of an "Analogy of Being"," in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

Pryzywara traced the problem back, not to Kant, but to Luther. For Pryzywara, Luther had made God the "all-determining reality" with "no room for a genuine freedom in the human." Divine transcendence and immanence were thereafter resolved in one of two ways, either (i) following Luther, "collapsing the world into God," so that, in effect, divine activity is all "without remainder", or (ii) by way of reaction to this, "collaps[ing] divine activity into creaturely activity." In Pryzywara's view, Spinoza and Hegel make the first error: Kant and Nietzsche the second. (Ibid., 95.)

The similarity with Webster's view is in the agreement that the God-world relation (and especially the question of agency) is at the heart of modernity's woes. The difference is of course in what Webster calls the "archaeology" of these ideas. For Webster – a good Protestant! – the Reformers (especially Calvin, but Luther also) have got it more-or-less right: critical philosophy marks the start of the decline.

Similarly, Webster's critique finds a different genesis for modernity's problems than that proposed by "Radical Orthodoxy." As James K. A. Smith explains, "Radical Orthodoxy chronicles modernity's flattening of the world as a denial of transcendence that charges the materiality of creation." This is traced back to the late middle ages, and specifically "the ontological shift in Duns Scotus's affirmation of univocity," but again, the Reformation is thought to have exacerbated the problem. See James K. A. Smith, "Introduction: Reverberations: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition," in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation*, ed. James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 16-17. As Webster writes, according to Radical Orthodoxy's "genealogy of modernity the Reformation is a defection from the unified catholic vision of reality shattered by Scotus and followers." See John Webster, "Ressourcement Theology and Protestantism," in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 490. Webster rejects such "somewhat angular" critiques, suggesting that in fact Protestantism was "following through the logic of the distinction between uncreated and created being," rather than "segregating the supernatural from the natural and [...] denying any stable or enduring presence of the former in the latter." (Ibid., 491.)

This "naturalism," Webster observes, "was often coupled to a kind of nominalism."[41] By this he refers to the tendency of modern thinkers to separate the divine economy from the creaturely realities (Webster sometimes calls them "human signs") which inhabit, and bear witness to, that economy, and to the God of creation behind and around it: "once again, elements without principles."[42] This is "a kind of nominalism" because, on such a construal, the "human signs" lose any real referent.

To summarise the above discussion, the material problem of modernity in Webster's view is (i) its misinterpretation of the God-world relation in traditional theology as one of (competitive) dualism leading to disintegration, and (ii) its consequent reformulation of the God-world relation in the terms of idealist or critical philosophy, so that the sovereign God of Scripture disappears from view, and created reality is thought to have some kind of integrity either independent of, or interdependent upon, God. How are the dualisms of modernity to be overcome so that we may truly confess God as he is? For John Webster, the answer is *not*, it must be said, by replacing naturalism with a kind of "supernaturalism." This was, in the earlier Webster's view at least, the error of the Protestant scholastics, and it will be considered in detail in chapter four below, especially in relation to Scripture. Instead, Webster argues positively that a robustly Trinitarian concept of divine *perfection* is the key to bringing together *God* and the *gospel*, or theology proper and the economy of salvation, in a non-dualist relation.[43] Webster does not offer an "exclusive" account of God's perfection, but insists that it includes "the movement in

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41. Webster, *DoW*, ix. Webster understands "nominalism" as "a flight from allowing any intrinsic relation between natural or cultural forms and the reality of God," in opposition to "an earlier ontology of the participation of created forms in God," which has been "lost." He accepts that this may well have its roots in Duns Scotus. (Ibid., 11.)

42. Ibid., ix.

43. See Webster, *CG*, 1-4.

which [God] makes himself known to creatures," or his "presence" to creation.[44] Herein, Webster argues, is the foundation for a truly "evangelical dogmatics."[45] A full exposition of the details of this proposal, in both its earlier (Barthian) and later (more Thomistic) inflections follows in the next chapter.

2.2.2 Modernity's Formal Problem

Modernity's misconstrual of the God-world relation has given rise, according to Webster, to its *formal* problem, namely the development of a dogmatics that has lost both its location and its sense of proportion.[46] Webster's frequent lament that the discipline of theology has been forced to conform itself to supposedly religiously-neutral canons of inquiry in the academy is one consequence of this problem.[47] In addition, when the God-world relation is wrongly construed, particular doctrines in

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44. Ibid., 3.

45. Ibid., 5.

46. The precise relationship between the formal and material aspects of modernity is, in reality, probably more complex than is suggested here, and Webster himself certainly recognises this complexity. In one of his essays on Christology, Webster makes the observation that "formal and material concerns rarely exist in equilibrium; much more often, precedence is given to either formal or material." (Webster, *W&C*, 114.) In respect of Christology, at least, Webster thinks that modernity tended to prioritise the formal, with its subordination of "religious claims about Jesus" to "universally valid processes of intellectual inquiry considered to have greater authority than the merely domestic doctrine of the church." Part of Webster's solution is to redress the balance by advocating "the priority of substantive doctrine." (Ibid., 115.) Whichever comes logically "first," there is clearly in Webster's view a mutually-reinforcing effect of form and substance in any dogmatics, for good or for ill.

47. In contrast to the picture of theological study painted by the Reformed scholastic Ursinus, Webster laments the state of theology in the modern university. Theology has become "critical" in nature. Modern attempts to account for the relationship between Scripture and theology are "entangled in [...] dualism." Whereas, for Ursinus, Scripture is "not simply one concern of theology, but that towards which all studies in divinity move," modernity has seen the division of theology as a discipline so that it has lost its unity and coherence. (Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 118-21.)

the theological encyclopaedia begin to "over-reach" themselves, at the cost of others which are thereby "eclipsed." The hypertrophy or atrophy of theological *loci* undermines the coherence and explanatory power of a well-balanced dogmatic system, leading to disorder and fragmentation.[48]

In response, Webster sought to express a "well-ordered, intellectually and spiritually cogent Christian theology."[49] Such a balanced and integrated dogmatics might be characterised in terms of the slogan, "theological theology." The slogan has a double meaning when applied to Webster's work. First – and this was Webster's original intention – it was a clarion call to do theology *theologically*, using theology's own conceptual resources and eschewing correlationist approaches borrowed from other disciplines.[50] Second – in an additional nuance that arose from Webster's own later commitments – it may refer to an approach to dogmatics that *begins with God* in himself (theology *proper*), and proceeds from that starting-point to develop an account of the economy which is at every point grounded in the fullness of the divine life. Webster believed that this formal approach to dogmatics would safeguard a right proportionality in a dogmatic system, relieving the pressure that some over-inflated doctrines had been forced to bear due to mislocation or misproportion. Such a dogmatics would, Webster believed, be its own apologetic, uniquely able to meet the challenges of modernity and postmodernity alike.

In summary, John Webster's theological project was, at least in part, a response to the perceived failings of modernity. Webster believed that this required

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48. Perhaps the most important example of this phenomenon, for the later Webster in particular, is the hypertrophy of economic concerns at the expense of an atrophied theology proper. Webster offers an account of this in a Christological context in Webster, *GWM*, 1:51.

49. Webster, *DoW*, vii.

50. An extension of this point is the assertion that "[t]heology cannot be and do and say everything," lest it lose its "determinacy, integrity and stability as the attempt to hear and repeat the one Word of God." (Webster, *Holiness*, 21.)

a rearticulation of the God-world relation in the context of a well-ordered dogmatics that begins with the Triune God.

2.3 Premodernity

On one level, the idea that premodernity might be considered a twentieth or twenty-first century theologian's "context" seems counterintuitive. However, critics of Webster – and of others engaged in the "Theological Interpretation of Scripture" (TIS) movement – have sometimes suggested that TIS theologians are basically premodern thinkers.[51] But Webster is better characterised as a theologian committed to Protestant *ressourcement*.[52] Kevin Vanhoozer, one of Webster's closest theological "allies," describes Webster as a "retrieval theologian."[53] Vanhoozer sums up in

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51. An example is the Oxford Old Testament scholar John Barton in John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007). Barton did not interact specifically with Webster in his written work, perhaps because they were colleagues. But Barton's critique clearly has work like Webster's in view. Barton's criticisms will be explored in depth later in this thesis.

52. This assessment is shared by Sonderegger in Sonderegger, "God-Intoxicated Theology," 27.

As Webster himself recognises, strictly speaking *ressourcement* is a movement in Roman Catholic theology. Indeed, this movement has not typically been amenable to Protestantism: "*ressourcement* thinkers themselves tended to view Protestantism as an instance of the declension of the church which they sought to reverse." See Webster, "Ressourcement," 483. Nevertheless, Webster recognises Barth and T. F. Torrance as Protestants who followed a similar approach to Patristic and medieval sources as their Roman Catholic *ressourcement* counterparts, and he notes "a number of [Protestant] systematic theologies which share some *ressourcement* attitudes to tradition and modes of theology," including those of Schlink, Wainwright, and Oden. (Ibid., 488.) While maintaining the Protestant conviction (against Roman Catholicism) that the gospel and the church must not be confused, Webster nevertheless sees *ressourcement* as an "opportunity" for Protestant theologians to "take part in the conversation of tradition." (Ibid., 493.)

53. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Don't Call it "Retro": Retrieval Theologians Are Looking Back to Move Forward," (2018): accessed 4 August 2018, https://academic.logos.com/dont-call-it-retro-retrieval-theologians-are-looking-back-to-move-forward/.

characteristically pithy style: "If modern theologians look at past theology and say "out of date," retrieval theologians look at modern theology and say "out of touch.""[54] This does not imply that Webster worked as though modernity had never happened: as we have seen, his project was largely shaped and driven by the concern to engage and challenge the modern paradigm. But it does mean that Webster found rich resources in premodern theology that facilitated this engagement.

In a programmatic chapter entitled "Theologies of Retrieval," Webster defines "retrieval" as "a *mode* of theology, an attitude of mind and a way of approaching theological tasks which is present with greater or lesser prominence in a range of different thinkers, not all of them self-consciously 'conservative' or 'orthodox'."[55] Such theologies have in common a commitment to realism: in other words, they are opposed to idealist or nominalist approaches. As Webster describes the situation, for retrieval theologies, "immersion in the texts and habits of thought of earlier (especially pre-modern) theology opens up a wide view of the object of Christian theological reflection, setting before its contemporary practitioners descriptions of the faith unharassed by current anxieties, and enabling a certain liberty in relation to the present."[56] The crucial intellectual move made by theologies of retrieval is that they propose "different genealogies of modernity."[57] In other words, they reject the dominant narrative according to which the intellectual work of premodernity lacks critical objectivity and therefore validity, by the canons of modernism.

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54. Ibid. Webster himself denied that he proposed mere "exegetical atavism," but rather "attending to [the saints'] overthrow as idolaters and their reconstitution as intelligent hearers." See Webster, *DoW*, 24.

55. Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," 584.

56. Ibid., 584-85.

57. Ibid., 585.

The influence of Jüngel on Webster's own convictions in this regard has already been noted above. Further examples of retrieval theologians follow in Webster's essay: Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and the various proponents of "Radical Orthodoxy." What is common to all of these thinkers is that modernity itself is considered to be "a contingent, not an absolute, phenomenon."[58] Without doubt, however, the most significant personal influence on John Webster by a theologian of retrieval was that of George Schner. Indeed, in O'Donovan's estimation, "in understanding John, understanding George Schner is fairly crucial."[59]

O'Donovan recalls the considerable influence of Schner on Webster, and Webster's shock at the early loss of his friend.[60] Three years later, a posthumous collection of Schner's essays was published, in which Webster offers this assessment: "Schner was one of the very best Christian minds of his generation, a theological and philosophical thinker of remarkable depth and range."[61] In the introduction to the essay collection, Webster expands on what distinguished Schner's approach to the theological task: he was "primarily a reader and teacher, and only derivatively a writer." The "central acts of [Schner's] intellectual vocation" were,

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58. Ibid., 589.

59. O'Donovan, interview.

60. O'Donovan, interview. Schner died in 2000, at the age of just 54. An obituary may be found in John Allen Loftus, "In Memoriam: George Peter Schner, S.J. 1946-2000," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 16, no. 2 (2000). Webster dedicated his 2001 book, *Word and Church*, to Schner *in memoriam*, with the inscription "συνεργός [*sic.*] τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ." See Webster, *W&C*, v. Not for the first time in Webster's books, he (or his editor?) breaks the rules of Koiné Greek accentuation: συνεργός should be συνεργὸς. Another example is his reference to "θεόπνευστια" in ibid., 30. Webster places the accent on the syllable before the propretonic, which is impossible. The correct accentuation is on the pretonic: θεοπνευστία.

61. George P. Schner, *Essays Catholic and Critical*, ed. Philip G. Ziegler and Mark Husbands (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), outside back cover.

> the formation of his own mind by wide and deep reading, and the formation of the minds of others by instructing them in the skills of *lectio*. The chief feature of his intellectual landscape was a canon of texts of enduring substance and authority, largely modern [...] although in his final years the list began to stretch back into the classics of patristic theology and exegesis. The social embodiment of his ideals concerning the intellectual life was the Church academy, conceived as a school for learning Christ.[62]

One cannot help but be struck by the ways in which this description of Schner fits Webster's own developing approach at this time.

Webster continues by outlining Schner's approach to reading and interpreting texts, in particular his "disciplined attentiveness." In short, "Schner was a master reader."[63] In addition, he was "a highly self-conscious teacher," who laboured to educate men and women to serve the church by teaching the person of Christ.[64] Webster notes that Schner situates both acts – reading and teaching – in the context of tradition: they are "not acts of individuality or originality."[65] Philosophical theology, for Schner, is therefore "an activity within the tradition undertaken by its inhabitants, [not] an activity apart from the tradition undertaken by its inspectors."[66]

A close reading of Webster's introduction to Schner's essays reveals yet more ways in which his articulation of Schner's approach to theology parallels his own method. By way of example, there is first Schner's insistence that any one theological

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62. John Webster, "Introduction: Philosophy and the Practices of Christianity," in *Essays Catholic and Critical*, ed. Philip G. Ziegler and Mark Husbands (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), xi.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid., xi-xii.

65. Ibid., xii. The profoundly anti-postmodern thrust of this statement should not be lost on readers.

66. Ibid.

theme must not be treated in such a way as to remove it from its exegetical moorings, or dogmatic connections to other doctrinal *loci*.[67] Second, Schner understood religion as an embodied practice, lived and imagined in community.[68] In this we may note the influence of the Yale School on Schner, who was himself a graduate of Yale Divinity School. Webster's own relationship with the Yale School will be discussed below.

We may also detect affinities between Webster's reading of Schner, and his own account of the plight of the modern discipline of theology in the university, as he summarises Schner's critique of "the invention by philosophy of a version of Christianity which can be translated into, subsumed within, or defended by categories and arguments derived from outside, but whose relation to positive Christian religion is increasingly distant."[69] Schner, on the other hand, "is reaching towards [...] a retrieval of philosophy, not as a critical or metaphysical norm by which religion may be judged intellectually admissible, but as a set of conceptual and analytical tools which can serve as an *ancilla theologiae*."[70] Such preoccupations, unsurprisingly, situate Schner as cutting "against the grain of mainstream academic theology's routines."[71] Again, we might well imagine Webster's own identification with his description of Schner spending "a great deal of time combating the bafflement, even outrage, which greeted his conception."[72]

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67. Ibid., xiii.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., xv.

70. Ibid., xvi.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

Reduced to its salient points, Schner's influence on Webster may be summarised in two aspects, both of which relate in some way to "reading," understood first *materially* and second *methodologically*. First – materially – Schner taught Webster the importance of paying close attention to the act of reading itself, and to the posture of the hermeneut *vis-à-vis* the text. This question would be an ongoing interest of Webster's, not only in respect of the classical texts of the tradition, but in respect of Holy Scripture itself.

Second – methodologically – through the graduate seminars that he co-taught with Webster, Schner demonstrated first-hand to Webster the value of close, questioning-but-humble reading of the classic texts of the tradition, which helped lead Webster to a new construal of the positive task of dogmatics. It is important to note that Schner's pedagogical method was *not* the typical way that theology was taught in the England in the 1970s and 1980s. We have already noted in chapter one Webster's early experience of studies in systematic theology. This was a discipline shaped in England by the prevalence of what Webster calls "doctrinal criticism."[73] From his point of view, this approach put systematic theology on a defensive footing, insecure as to its own viability and integrity as an academic discipline. The critical focus also led to atomised treatment of themes in theology, with little or no appreciation for the whole, or for a framework within which those theological *loci* might be drawn together. The result was, as Webster recalls: "I was well schooled in the tactics of criticism, but not taught how to inhabit or think from a tradition."[74] Thus Webster could write of his first teaching job at St John's College in Durham that he was "desperately ill-prepared, lacking a mature sense of the scope of

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73. Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics," 129. Things were rather different in Scotland, where the influence of T. F. Torrance mediating Barth to the theological academy led to a greater focus on dogmatic theology.

74. Ibid., 130.

Christian doctrine, and more than anything else still needing to break free of the habit of going straight to critical questions."[75]

It was in Canada, largely under the influence of George Schner, that Webster finally found clarity in respect of the theologian's vocation, and with that clarity came a new focus on "positive" dogmatics.[76] In Toronto, Webster recalls that he made the "remarkably emancipating decision to teach confessionally," *assuming* the truth of the Christian confession as a starting-point, and structuring the content of his teaching along the lines of the Apostles' Creed. This particular methodology was one that Webster was content to follow throughout the rest of his career, and it seems reasonable to suggest that his interest in theological *ressourcement* also dates from this period and from Schner's example in particular.[77] Certainly, from this point onwards, Webster's work has a growing sense of purpose, exhibiting a dual focus on learning from and interpreting the great texts of the Christian tradition, and constructing a dogmatic theology that integrates the various theological *loci* into the wider whole. In his Oxford inaugural lecture, "Theological Theology," Webster recalled Schner's commitment to "the classical priority of the object of theological study."[78] This was the principle that theological method should be determined not by

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75. Ibid. This is reminiscent of Barth's account of his unpreparedness for his first teaching job as professor of Reformed doctrine at Göttingen.

76. Ibid.

77. This is also the assessment of Francis Kerr. See Kerr, "John Webster and Catholic Theology," 2. It does not seem as though Webster's final institutional moves to "secular" professorships at Aberdeen and St Andrews affected the prosecution of this approach.

78. See George P. Schner, *Education for Ministry: Reform and Renewal in Theological Education* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1993), 33. Cited in Webster, *CG*, 25.

the "subjective conditions of enquirers" but "by that to which they direct their loving attention."[79] As Fergus Kerr points out, this became "a basic Webster concern."[80]

The methodological solution to the plight of modernity, according to theologians of retrieval like Schner, is a programme of *ressourcement*, beginning with the Bible, and extending to the classics of the patristic and medieval sources. Webster himself specified some of the characteristics of theologies of retrieval. They are descriptive of faith's *objects*, rather than problem-focused.[81] They "eschew saying anything new," under the conviction that the answers are contained within the tradition.[82] More importantly, perhaps, retrieval theologies refuse to treat Christianity as a species of anything else: Christianity is "irreducible."[83] Principal of doctrines that have returned to the forefront of dogmatics along these lines are those of the Trinity (the most important example), ecclesiology, and creation.

At times in his work, Webster can be found specifically defending premodern theology against its detractors. For example, in defining the attributes of God, Webster is opposed to abstraction through the so-called "logic of perfection" or "perfect being theology."[84] But he insists that the roots of this approach are not found in premodern theology (as is commonly supposed) but in that "systematic natural theology" which developed from the seventeenth century.[85]

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79. Ibid.

80. Kerr, "John Webster and Catholic Theology," 5.

81. Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," 592.

82. Ibid., 592-93.

83. Ibid., 593. Note the echo of "theological theology" in this distinctive.

84. John Webster, "The Immensity and Ubiquity of God," in *Denkwürdiges Geheimnis: Beiträge Zur Gotteslehre. Festschrift Für Eberhard Jüngel Zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. Ingolf U. Dalferth, Johannes Fischer, and Hans-Peter Großhans (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), repr. in *CG*, 88-89.

85. Ibid., 89. Webster does not specify where this sort of theology is to be found. If he is

We should be careful, however, not to assume that Webster advocated a simple "return" to premodern theology, as if such a move were possible. Webster himself sounds a cautionary note along these lines: "the problem is not *modern* theology but simply *theology*. All talk of God is hazardous. Modern constraints bring particular challenges which can be partially defeated by attending to a broader and wiser history, but there is no pure Christian past whose retrieval can ensure theological fidelity."[86] In one of his late essays on Scripture, Webster notes premodernity's "relaxed and often quite minimal" treatment of questions of causation. Therefore his response to modernity is not simply to reiterate a premodern approach, but to move towards "greater explicitness."[87]

In concrete terms, Webster's methodological commitment developed in the following two ways: (i) an increased interest in the work of other theologians of retrieval, across the theological spectrum,[88] and (ii) significant theological retrieval in his own work. This second development is given formal expression in his preface to *The Domain of the Word*, where Webster registers "some changes of emphasis and idiom in the present collection," including a widening of source material – a *ressourcement* that includes the work of patristic, medieval and post-Reformation

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referring to the scholastic theology of so-called "high" and "late" orthodoxy, it is likely that this is a critique he would later have nuanced, as he came to interact more directly with theologians like Owen and Turretin.

86. Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," 596-97.

87. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 242.

88. For example, John Webster, "Purity and Plenitude: Evangelical Reflections on Congar's *Tradition and Traditions*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (2005), repr. in Gabriel Flynn, ed. *Yves Congar: Theologian of the Church* (Louvain / Grand Rapids: Peeters / Eerdmans, 2005), also repr. in *GWM*, 1:195-210.
Note also the sustained engagement with Henri de Lubac in John Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," *Ecclesiology* 1 (2004), repr. as "The Church and the Perfection of God," in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, eds. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), also repr. in *CG*, 153-93.

scholastic voices.[89] Sometimes the trend is explicit and to the fore: a chapter from 2011 on theology's relationship to the humanities represents a sustained essay-length attempt at theological *ressourcement*, consisting of a reading of Bonaventure's *Reduction of the Arts to Theology* (c.1270) in conversation with Augustine.[90] Webster's theological method "in a nutshell" thus becomes, according to East, "contemporary glosses on ancient theological authorities, with Scripture having the priority."[91] East gives the further examples of Webster's treatment of Christology and ethics "by simply reading Paul's letter to the Colossians,"[92] and his work on courage, which "more or less straightforwardly follows" patristic and mediaeval sources.[93] But for the most part, the trend is registered incrementally in the developing breadth of Webster's conversation-partners: studying the footnotes of his later essay collections reveals an eclectic range of (particularly, but by no means exclusively) premodern sources. These include Calvin, Owen[94] and other seventeenth-century Reformed orthodox writers, Augustine, and (most frequently of all) Thomas Aquinas.

> Oliver O'Donovan offers an interesting insight on this development:
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> Within the first year of [Webster's] time in Oxford, I remember him saying to me (before or after Evensong, I can't remember which it was) that he'd

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89. Webster, *DoW*, ix.

90. John Webster, "*Regina Artium*: Theology and the Humanities," in *Theology, University, Humanities. Initium Sapientiae Timor Dei*, ed. Christopher C. Brittain and Francesca A. Murphy (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), repr. in *DoW*, 171-92.

91. East, "The Church's Book," 115n.

92. John Webster, "'Where Christ is': Theology and Ethics," in *Christology and Ethics*, ed. F. Leron Schultz and Brent Waters (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), repr. in *GWM*, 2:5-27.

93. John Webster, "Courage," in *A Man of the Church: Honoring the Theology, Life, and Witness of Ralph Del Colle*, ed. Michael Barnes (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), repr. in *GWM*, 2:87-102.

94. Webster describes Owen as "one of the finest English divines from the mid- to the late-seventeenth century," in *GWM*, 1:50.

> decided he was going to focus his attention on a major figure in the tradition. He'd come with his Barth, his modern German stuff that he'd brought: Barth, Jüngel, and decided he needed to get into the tradition better. So, he thought he would probably concentrate on Calvin. And I remember encouraging him in that. And that was I think very important because I think that road started the intellectual journey of exploration that actually made him the great figure he became. Because Calvin later led into Owen and the scholastics. Henry Chadwick was appalled to learn that John was working on teaching John Owen.[95] Henry of course looked on John Owen as the black sheep of the history of Christ Church.[96] [...] John took him up and decided he was very important. [...] Good for John, I say. It was a way of relating to his institution which was (I suppose the way we all relate to our institutions) to take some interest in their history, who's been there before us, what have they done, and to take up a neglected figure, one who doesn't figure large in the official histories, and find that he is theologically very rich. The move was clear. He went to Calvin first, and then from Calvin to the post-Calvinists, and then back to the Middle Ages, which was very logical, because by the seventeenth century they were all deeply interested in that sort of thing [...] and John just followed it up. It's not only towards Aquinas that he goes. Other scholastics, and Augustine and Chrysostom too.[97]

Above all, a return to the past meant, for John Webster, a return to *Holy Scripture itself*. It is wrong to think that going back to the Bible as a source for theological reflection means that Webster treated Scripture as merely one more resource among many, or even as *primus inter pares* in that regard. As we shall see, Webster always maintained the Bible's uniqueness in terms of its ontology, and therefore (derivative of its ontology) in terms of its authority. Nevertheless, the Bible remained, for Webster, the ultimate source for theological retrieval, albeit in this special sense. We have seen that Webster has been criticised by biblical scholars

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95. Henry Chadwick (1920-2008) had been Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford (1959-1970) and Dean of Christ Church (1969-79). Chadwick retired in 1993, but continued to live in Oxford until his death.

96. Owen had been both Dean of Christ Church and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford under the Protectorate (1652-1660).

97. O'Donovan, interview.

such as Walter Moberly and N. T. Wright for his lack of attention to the material *content* of Scripture.[98] There is certainly something in these criticisms that deserves to be recognised. With some notable exceptions, readers will search in vain through Webster's corpus for extensive passages of exegesis such as are offered by, say, Barth or Calvin.[99] Almost entirely absent is any exegetical discussion of most of the Old Testament, apart from some isolated references to Genesis, Isaiah, and the Psalter. This situation seems to jar with Webster's own repeated insistences that theology's primary task is precisely *exegesis*,[100] or that systematic theology must be "transparent" to Scripture.[101] If Webster is to be defended at this point, we may note that his work tends to be concerned with the "big picture" of the biblical story, and this is at the heart of his refusal to separate systematic theology from "biblical" theology, in its concern with the temporal unfolding of revelation.[102] What Webster

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98. D. A. Carson, likewise, accuses Webster of a "neglect of what Scripture says," in describing doctrines that he "carefully and thoughtfully works out, but without testing [them] against the sheer phenomena of the documents that make up Scripture." See D. A. Carson, *Collected Writings on Scripture*, comp. Andrew David Naselli (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 248-49.

99. Such exceptions include the late essays: John Webster, "One Who is Son: Theological Reflections on the Exordium to the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, eds. Richard J. Bauckham *et al* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), repr. in *GWM*, 1:59-80; Webster, "'Where Christ is'," repr. in *GWM*, 2:5-28.

100. See, for example, his comments in Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 3; Webster, *DoW*, 29. In the former place, Webster states that "the primary theological task [...] is exegesis. [...T]he development of a dogmatic account of Scripture may have a certain polemical timeliness. But what it may not do is replace or eclipse the work of exegesis." In the latter place, he admits that it is only "in the course of actual exegesis" that a "sufficiently full answer" to certain questions about hermeneutics may be found.

101. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 133. See also particularly the extended section in ibid., 128-31. There, Webster tells us that "Holy Scripture is the centre of theology," and so "it is of prime importance to avoid construing dogmatics as a set of improvements upon Scripture."

102. Webster, *DoW*, 148.

offers his readers is, in Sonderegger's words, "an analytic but unembarrassed *theological* reading of the Bible."[103]

This chapter has defended the thesis that Webster's theological project may be characterised as a response to the problems of *modernity* (material and formal) by means of a retrieval of *pre-modern* theological resources, articulated in and for a *post-modern* context. John Webster cannot simply be described as a premodern theologian. But he came to believe that premodern theology represented a rich seam for the theologian to mine, always with an eye to articulating dogmatics for the present day.

2.4 Postmodernity

Ultimately, John Webster came to the conclusion that "theology should bow its knee neither to modern nor to postmodern agendas."[104] Yet Webster took seriously the various postmodern approaches, and challenges, to the theological task.[105] One such approach was that of postliberal theology. For a time, Webster was attracted to the Yale school (postliberal, or narrative) theology.[106] Later in his career,

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103. Sonderegger, "God-Intoxicated Theology," 39.

104. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Scripture and Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 163.

105. For example, Webster paid significant attention to postmodern deconstruction of "substantial and enduring human selfhood and agency," and "dissolution of the metaphysics of divine discourse." (Webster, *W&C*, 3, 28.)

106. Webster writes, "Like others in the late 1980s who were searching, dissatisfied both with theological liberalism and with merely reactionary agendas, and for a constructive way forward in theology, I was much preoccupied with the theological work that came out of Yale." (Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics," 132.)
An example of this preoccupation is found in an essay of 1986 in which Webster indicates his concern to hold together the determinative value of the "ordinary historicality" of Jesus with "the confession that God is indeed subject and agent." See John Webster, "Atonement,

Webster explained this attraction as being in particular due to the Yale school's appropriation of Barth, although the school's focus on forms of religious life and sociolinguistic communities struck a chord with certain postmodern concerns. But this was to be a short-lived affair: ultimately the Yale school seemed to Webster to collapse dogmatics into sociology because of a failure to begin with the Triune God and his revelation. In other words, as he says, the scholars of Yale "made the mistake of reading the *Church Dogmatics* backwards."[107] In the end, Webster rejected the approach of narrative theology, because he felt that its "ecclesial" starting-point gave too little weight to the free agency of God. For Webster, postliberalism's reductionist dissolution of theological activity into a kind of ethnography of ecclesial practice left it incapable of properly accounting for divine action. Indeed, the lack of a direct role for *God* in the Yale school's portrayal of Jesus Christ, and its unwillingness to employ metaphysical categories in Christology seemed to Webster to lead to an over-focus on the humanity of Jesus.[108]

One of John Webster's most important sustained interactions with postmodernism is found in an article on theological anthropology.[109] Webster wants

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History and Narrative," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 42 (1986), 115. Webster's prescription, with a heavy dose of influence from the Yale school, is to employ the services of narrative theology, "asserting that [Jesus'] identity can only be grasped in and with the actualities of his life-story." (Ibid., 120.) What is to be gained by such an approach? Webster argues that "[n]arrative refuses the synthetic; it drags our attention back to detail too readily absorbed in propositional descriptions." (Ibid., 121.)

107. Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics," 132.

108. An example of Webster's critique of the Yale school (in this case, Hans Frei) along these lines may be found in John Webster, "Response to George Hunsinger," *Modern Theology* 8, no. 2 (1992). This response was given at the 1990 "Hans Frei Conference" in Toronto, organised by the Karl Barth Society.

109. John Webster, "Eschatology, Anthropology and Postmodernity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2 (2000). Parts of this essay were also included in John Webster, "Postmodern Eschatology?" *Toronto Journal of Theology* 15 (1999), repr. as "Human Identity in A Postmodern Age," in *Tolerance and Truth: The Spirit of the Age or the Spirit of God?* ed. Angus Morrison (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2007), also repr. in *W&C*, 263-86.

to downplay the importance of "epochal claims," for the entire period of human history between Jesus' first and second advents should be treated as a united "space" which alone is "determinative of what church and theology may and must be."[110] Any more narrow understanding of context is therefore by definition deemphasised, as dogmatics cannot be servant to what is no more than "a contingent set of cultural arrangements."[111] On the other hand, Webster concedes that theology cannot ignore "the particular set of exigencies which have come to be termed collectively as postmodernity."[112]

Webster's description of postmodernity may be summarised by way of a number of key quotations. Postmodernity, according to Webster:

> repudiate[s] presence, the given, depth, order, identities and structures, in favour of absence, surfaces, dispersal, the non-identical, plurality, play [..;] usher[s] in the end of 'onto-theology' [..;] turns away from the substance metaphysics of selfhood, history and deity [..;] is deeply hostile to teleological renderings of history, with their apparently unified trajectories and their emphasis on the preservation of identity [..; and is] inimical to accounts of moral agency which tie human action to pre-given human identity or to an overarching framework within which moral action is possible and meaningful.[113]

Unsurprisingly, Webster is at best suspicious (at worst, utterly dismissive) of postmodernity's concerns and constructs.[114] Postmodernity has had, he avers, a

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110. Ibid., 266. For Webster, then, history is not cyclical but linear, and the incarnation of the Son of God is determinative of its meaning. On the other hand, Webster rejects a certain, modern, account of historical "progress." See Webster, *CG*, 17.

111. Webster, *W&C*, 266.

112. Ibid., 267.

113. Ibid., 268.

114. Webster can be stinging at times in his assessment of self-consciously "postmodern" scholarship: "surely at times a most humourless bit of contemporary intellectual vanity." See John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh, Grand Rapids: T&T Clark, Eerdmans, 1998), 126.

"dissolutionary" effect on both teleology and the human person. He interacts with works by Mark Taylor and John Caputo to show that postmodernist readings of history either leave no room for eschatology at all (Taylor) or else re-frame "a kind of eschatology" without *telos* (Caputo on Derrida).[115]

In response, Webster suggests that the postmodern critique has misunderstood true Christian eschatology and has instead focused on "its pathological substitute."[116] Certainly, Christian theology implies a commitment to a "grand narrative." But, crucially, "we are not [...] committed to the abuse of that narrative as if the future of God's coming were 'to hand,' an available *telos* neatly completing whatever purposes we happen to have arranged for ourselves."[117] Webster therefore argues, first, for the "personal identity" of Christian eschatology, as the precondition for any talk of teleology. Following Gerhard Sauter, Webster makes this a dictum: we must "concentrate *on the eschatos rather than on the eschata*."[118] Second, Webster stresses that the character of the coming of Christ is "promissory, not possessive."[119] By this move, Webster wants to introduce a measure of humility into the audacity of claim that Jesus will return. The eschatological "confidence" which Webster espouses is tempered by the "hiddenness of its object" and chastened by its "unavailability for systematic comprehension and its resistance to be used as an instrument in some project of our own devising."[120] All this means that when Christians speak of eschatology, one of the "primary modes" of such

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115. Webster, *W&C*, 271-72.

116. Ibid., 272.

117. Ibid., 273-74.

118. Cited in ibid., 274. Emphasis original.

119. Ibid., 275.

120. Ibid.

articulation is prayer, which – in its nature as *personal* and *humble* discourse – Webster argues, gives voice to the two concerns he has just raised.[121]

In his subsequent treatment of the dissolution of the human subject, Webster finds that selfhood "shares the same fate as teleology in postmodernism: it is left behind in the migration to the fields of anarchic free play."[122] Webster's response to this leads to his assertion that "postmodern turns from eschatology may constitute a (literally) hopeless amoral and apolitical account of what it means to be human."[123] What Webster means is that without eschatology, there is no means of evaluating or situating human action so that it is meaningful and purposive. Webster accepts that postmodernity's rejection of the modern view of personhood is to be welcomed, but in its place he proposes (following Calvin Schrag) a "narratival achievement of identity" which is grounded in a "moral anthropology in the framework of the drama of human nature, origin and destiny, a drama presided over by the triune God who will bring it to its consummation at the appearing of the Lord Jesus."[124] By using the idiom of moral "space," Webster intends not to constrict, but to express "agency in relation."[125] Again, this is not an "ethical reductionism" but the recognition that "any talk of God is also talk of the identity of God's creatures."[126]

In conclusion, John Webster's critique of postmodernity was not, perhaps, as relentless as that of modernity. Nevertheless, Webster ultimately rejected the postmodern paradigm as unable to account for the givenness of human identity, the

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121. Ibid., 276.

122. Ibid., 281.

123. Ibid.

124. Ibid., 282-83.

125. Ibid., 284.

126. Ibid. Further discussion on human agency and "moral ontology" follows in the next chapter.

meaningfulness of moral action, and, most importantly, the antecedent existence of the God of the Christian confession. If modernism's ontology had been beset with dualisms, postmodern ontology was hopelessly fragmented. Epistemologically, postmodernity's rejection of "grand narratives" had left the knowing subject at sea, without moorings against which to berth the doctrines of God and man. But, as the essay cited above shows, Webster sought to appeal to some postmodern sensibilities when he couched his eschatological proposal in terms of a "grand narrative" that is not "to hand." In other words, Christianity is not available to be exercised by human powers at their own will.

Ultimately, Webster was less-than-enamoured with the periodisation of intellectual history, and he believed that theology had its own, unchanging, task to pursue, *quasi*-independent of the winds of change. In a lecture of 1998 he told his audience, "The future of Christian theology is simply a matter of doing theology: calmly, cheerfully and humbly, with astonishment, repentance, vigilance, hope and joy. Nothing has happened to compel us to do otherwise."[127]

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a summary of John Webster's theological project in intellectual context. The argument has been that, although Webster himself was not fond of the periodisation of intellectual history, there is heuristic value in an analysis that specifies certain "periods," not least because Webster couched his own

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[127.] John Webster, "Barth and Postmodern Theology: A Fruitful Confrontation?" in *Karl Barth: A Future for Postmodern Theology*, ed. G. Thompson and C. Mostert (Sydney: Australian Theological Forum, 2000), 69. The now well-known (and frequently ironically employed) wartime slogan, "Keep Calm and Carry On" would not have been known to Webster when he gave these lectures, as the poster bearing these words was not "rediscovered" until 2000. See Bex Lewis, *Keep Calm and Carry on: The Truth Behind the Poster* (London: Imperial War Museum, 2017).

project in response to “modernism” and “postmodernism.” It is claimed here that Webster’s project may be understood as a response to the perceived problems of *modernity* (material and formal) by means of a (methodological) retrieval of *premodern* theological resources, articulated in and for a *postmodern* context. In chapter four, we shall see how this analysis applies to Webster’s doctrine of Scripture in particular. First, we turn to the fundamental topics of (1) the God-creature relation and (2) revelation in Webster’s theology.

§ 3. The God-Creature Relation and Revelation in John Webster's Theology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out John Webster's understanding of the God-creature relation and revelation, in order to situate – and so correctly interpret – his doctrine of Scripture in the context of his developing dogmatic architectonics. The primary focus throughout will of course be on Webster's own theology, but comparison will be made with other sources with which his work is in explicit dialogue, including Barth, Aquinas, and Reformed scholasticism. This fund of comparative resources will be drawn on later in the thesis when Webster's doctrine of Scripture is subject to a systematic assessment. The necessity of this chapter for a right appreciation of Webster's bibliology derives from Webster's articulation of Scripture's "dogmatic ontology" in precisely the context of his doctrine of God's internal and external works. Until we understand how Webster parses these doctrinal foundations, it will not be possible fully to grasp what he has to say about Holy Scripture.

The content of this chapter includes discussion of Webster's epistemology, ontology, and ethics. However, the material is not presented strictly according to these categories but follows Webster's own preferred terminology and arrangement of the theological *loci*. As we shall see, Webster's use of concepts such as "revelation" and "moral ontology" deliberately suggests ways in which epistemology, ontology, and ethics must be mutually defined and interpreted, resisting reductionist analysis. The chapter therefore consists of two main sections: first, "God, and All Things in Relation to God," and second, "Revelation."

Questions about the God-creature relation occupied Webster from his earliest days of theological inquiry. In his first book on Eberhard Jüngel (based on

his Ph.D. dissertation) Webster wondered whether Jüngel's "most significant theological achievement may turn out to be that of putting back onto the theological agenda some very large questions concerning the relation of the gracious God to his human creatures."[1] These "very large questions" concerned both dogmatics and ethics, and Webster spent much of his career pondering and writing about them. Such questions direct theology to its tasks, which include, at the very least: (1) the need to, on the one hand, distinguish between God and creation, and, on the other hand, relate God and creation (with the recognition that this is an inherently moral question bound up with the human confession of God); and (2) the responsibility to confess God "in a way that corresponds to the mode in which God gives himself to be known."[2] These tasks/questions cannot be entirely separated. However, in this chapter (1) is the principal topic of the first part, on "God and all things in relation to God." (2) will be considered under the topic of "revelation" in the second part of the chapter.

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1. Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology*, 129.

Even before the publication of his interpretative work on Barth, Webster's earliest publications (dating from the 1980s and early 1990s, and so produced before what is referred to in this chapter as his – constructive – "earlier" period) were characterised by an attempt to work through some of these issues which had engaged Jüngel. Particularly, in the light of Jüngel's claim that "man is determined by God as the analogate of Jesus Christ," Webster sought to work out the implications of that statement for an ontology of God and creation. See ibid., 114-15. While finding much to praise in Jüngel, Webster nevertheless criticised the German theologian's metaphor of the "starting-point" in his Christocentric approach to dogmatics. For Webster, Jüngel does not follow through on his own principle. (Ibid., 131.) The example par excellence of this failure is Jüngel's doctrine of God: it is not clear, Webster challenges, whether this is to be understood purely by means of "one-directional inference" (*from* Christology *to* theology proper) or whether there is a "more complex" interaction between the two. (Ibid., 134.)

2. Questions along these lines are suggested in Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 7-8. Or, as Wittman puts the latter question a few pages later: what (if anything) is the difference between God "in himself" and God as he reveals himself? (Ibid., 11.)

3.2 God, and All Things in Relation to God

Theology, as the later John Webster was fond of saying, is concerned with God, and all things in relation to God.[3] This suggests that the question of the God-creature relation is at the heart of theological science, or at the root of what it means to confess God *as God*. Webster explains that what he calls "theological reason" has a two-fold responsibility towards its two-fold object (God, and all things in relation to God). Its first responsibility is dogmatic; its second is practical/ethical. Webster's direct concern is almost exclusively with the former – dogmatic – responsibility, which he divides into (1) the inner and outer works of God, and (2) moral theology.[4] This is the division of material that will be followed in the analysis below.[5]

3.2.1 The Works of the Triune God

This sub-section is concerned with how John Webster understands and correlates the inner and outer works of God, or "theology" and "economy." It lays some essential groundwork for the next section on "revelation," but whereas the latter section will seek to integrate ontological and epistemological concerns to

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3. This way of framing the subject matter and arrangement of theology Webster borrows explicitly from the Protestant scholastic theologian Junius. Junius is, of course, following Thomas Aquinas. "In sum: theology is a distinct and unified science by virtue of its single complex object: God and all things studied under the formality of being relative to God." See Webster, *GWM*, 1:4.

4. Webster, *GWM*, 1:1.

5. It also corresponds roughly to the division of the subject-matter of the two volumes of *God Without Measure*. The second part of this chapter, on "revelation" is closely related to the material in *The Domain of the Word*. It should be remembered that *DoW* and *GWM* were intended to be read as companion volumes. For the expression of this intention, see Webster, *DoW*, vii.

understand Webster's articulation of what it means for God to make *himself* known to creatures, the focus here will be more specifically ontological. First, we must establish some terminological preliminaries: for our purposes, following the traditional use of Protestant scholasticism (with which the later Webster in particular is in explicit dialogue) the works of God *ad intra* are those immanent divine works "accomplished apart from any relation to externals [which] are, by definition, both eternal and immutable."[6] Both essential and personal works of God are included. The essential works of God *ad intra* are summed up as the divine decree, or divine counsel. The personal works of God are the Trinitarian relations. In contrast, the works of God *ad extra* are those works "according to which God creates, sustains, and otherwise relates to all finite things."[7] These *ad extra* works are the efflux of, and are grounded in, the essential divine decree, and they constitute its "execution or enactment" in the economy.[8] The *ad extra* works may be summed up as the missions of the Son and Spirit in space and time, in the works of nature, grace, and glory.

As he grappled with the relationship between theology and economy, it was Karl Barth (first) and Thomas Aquinas (later) who most influenced Webster's thinking. As Wittman notes, Barth and Aquinas, for all their differences, had some shared concerns: "one of the chief lessons we have to learn from both thinkers is that the intelligibility of God's relation to creation depends on materially prior teaching about God's fullness in himself such that questions about God's relation to creation are bound up with questions about divine act and being."[9] First, both Barth and Aquinas accepted that God is *actus purus*. Next, Wittman shows how Barth and

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6. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 211.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 212.

9. Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 16.

Aquinas each conceive of a divine "self-correspondence," by which he means "a hermeneutical device for tracing the forms of continuity between God's inner life and the extension of this life to us in time."[10] In relation to Barthian and Thomistic influence, respectively, we may now ask: how does Webster understand this self-correspondence of God in his "earlier" and "later" periods?

The earlier Webster affirms an actualistic ontology, against a classical and purely metaphysical approach to dogmatics.[11] Barth's influence is sometimes explicit in Webster's work, at other times it is implicitly present. By way of a very early example of such influence (1992), Webster insists on locating the centre of Christianity "in the history of Jesus Christ," a history which has fundamental "identity with the being and action of God."[12] Webster could quote Barth with approval: Jesus Christ "is the event [...] in which the covenant between God and man is sealed on both sides, in which peace is established both from above and from below, and in which the justification and sanctification of man are both accomplished."[13]

A related claim is made in respect of creaturely ontology. In his interpretive work on Barth, Webster explains that, for the Swiss theologian, all human reality is "enhypostatically real," having reality in the human reality of Jesus Christ.[14] Webster

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10. Ibid.

11. Wittman argues that theology cannot be (and should not seek to be) entirely free of metaphysics. Expressing an idea that is also developed by the later Webster, he notes that "[m]etaphysical concerns are [...] *intrinsic* to theology in the sense that it attempts to understand things in light of their principles." Ibid., 9. Emphasis added.

12. John Webster, "Locality and Catholicity: Reflections on Theology and the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45 (1992), 10.

13. Karl Barth, *CD*, IV.3, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 7. Cited in Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 127.

14. John Webster, "Assured and Patient and Cheerful Expectation: Barth on Christian Hope as the Church's Task," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 10, no. 1 (1994), 44.

himself builds on Barth's contention that the risen Jesus is constitutive of all human life: for humanity, "Jesus' history has ontological and epistemological priority."[15] In these, some of his earliest works, Webster recognises the complexity, and even the tensions, inherent in the relationship between theology and economy, but he does not attempt to resolve them. He sums up Barth's view with approval: Jesus Christ the God-man is "the form of God's aseity."[16] But he does not specify the precise nature of the relationship between the divine form and divine aseity, or attempt to place them in strict ontological order. His approach in this period may be classified as "Christocentric,"[17] while acknowledging that he was never content to allow theology entirely to atrophy at the expense of the economy.

As Webster began to focus on publishing his own critical and constructive theological work in the late 1990s and early 2000s (in this thesis, the "earlier" Webster), some of these themes are treated more explicitly. Again, the influence of Barth is visible at several important points. Consider first Wittman's summary of Barth's account of divine self-correspondence: "Barth seeks to confess God as "God is" primarily in terms of God's electing self-determination to be for humanity in Christ, which is understood as an internal act carrying dispositive entailments for God's being and precipitating what is functionally a real relation of God to the world."[18] The earlier Webster's view of divine self-correspondence is close to this summary of Barth.[19] First, the earlier Webster understands the works of God

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15. John Webster, "Eschatology, Ontology, and Human Action," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 7, no. 1 (1991), 6.

16. Webster, "Barth on Christian Hope," 37.

17. The designation of a theology as "Christocentric" has been problematised in Muller, "A Note on 'Christocentrism' and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology." The use of the term here reflects an actualistic approach similar to that of Barth.

18. Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 130.

19. Barth's legacy, particularly in respect of the doctrines of God and election, is of course

(particularly the gracious, redemptive works of God) *ad extra* as in some sense constitutive or determinative of the works of God *ad intra*, and therefore of the divine being-as-act. This point will be substantiated below. The determination is not, in Webster (or in Barth) one-way: there is thus *reciprocity* to God's self-correspondence. We may say that divine *promeity* and divine *aseity* are held in dynamic tension. The "link" between God and creatures is to be located primarily in Jesus Christ, by means of the analogy of faith.

Second, on this construal of God's self-correspondence, God has a functionally "real" relation to the world.[20] This point should not be pressed to mean more than it need establish. Webster never of course suggests that God is dependent on the world. Likewise Barth, as Wittman notes, consistently argued that God's objective perfection in himself is the ground of his external works.[21] Creation and revelation are therefore not strictly necessary on Barth's construal. Wittman explains: "Barth guards against such conclusions by texturing the notion of necessity with two rules: respectively, all the necessity belonging to God's being in his self-revelation derives from God's will, but this necessity is not thereby capricious because all acts of God's will are acts of God's faithfulness to himself."[22] Nevertheless, on Barth's construal it is "methodologically impossible to think of God apart from his relation to the world."[23] Barth's priority of the actual over the possible as the starting-point of theological reason led him to assert at least the contingent

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much controverted. Those debates cannot be entered into here.

20. To simplify, a "real" relation is one which belongs to the very nature of something. To say that God has a "real" relation to creation implies that God is in some sense God only in relation to the world. Webster cites Aquinas' more formal definition of a "real" relation in Webster, *GWM*, 1:124.

21. Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 131.

22. Ibid., 139.

23. Ibid., 143.

necessity of creation: as Wittman puts it, "in light of God's will, the thought of the world's or the Christ's nonexistence is ruled out of court for us."[24]

The earlier Webster's positioning of himself in respect of these Barthian emphases is helpfully summarised in his (original) introduction to *Confessing God*. There Webster highlights the programmatic concept for dogmatics of God's "perfection."[25] By this Webster means the "sovereign and majestic fullness with which God is himself; it is the eternal and entirely spontaneous plenitude and completeness of his life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit."[26] This is the God who relates to his creatures, a relation that Webster believes is best expressed by the ideas of "election" and "fellowship."[27] Covenantal fellowship with creatures is thus *included* in the perfection of God. This understanding tends towards establishing a "real" relation between God and creatures.[28] The economy of grace is ingredient to our conception of God's perfection, and theological reason must not transgress the boundaries established by God's "movement of love."[29] God and creatures are always

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24. Ibid., 138-39.

25. Webster, *CG*, 1. Emphasis added.

26. Ibid., 2. It is important to see that in this piece, the perfection of God is not a *formal*, but a *material* concept, the content of which is determined in fully evangelical specificity. (See ibid.)

27. Ibid. We may note the implied precedence of the covenant over creation in this construal. This will be further explored in chapter five below.

28. Webster argues that:

> properly deployed, this language [of "election" and "fellowship"] does not fall into the trap of proposing that God's perfection can only be safeguarded by denying any relation between God and creatures, protecting God by segregating him into remoteness. That way of conceiving God's perfection is excluded from the beginning in Christian theology, precisely because the gospel instructs us that God's perfect, self-directed life includes the willing and execution of a movement of love in which he glorifies himself by bringing into being a creature [...] God's perfection includes his perfecting of creatures. (Ibid.)

29. Ibid.

distinct, but God's perfect being "includes" the creature by means of what Webster calls a "second movement" of the divine being, "internally necessary, because it flows from the eternal divine counsel to be himself also in this second movement."[30]

For various reasons, Webster grew dissatisfied with this Barthian version of God's self-correspondence. First, in his preface to the second edition of *Confessing God* (2015), Webster reflected on "things which ought to have been said or said better" in his earlier essays. He identifies in particular the problem that, "the relation of God's immanent and economic acts is sometimes spoken of as reciprocally determinative in a way which does not cohere with the underlying account of divine perfection."[31] This is problematic for the later Webster because he becomes increasingly conscious of what he sees as a pathology affecting much modern theology, namely its tendency to relate everything to the personal history of Jesus, which history then becomes determinative for the doctrine of God.[32] In

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30. See ibid., 167.

31. Ibid., x. Kenneth Oakes, in his otherwise excellent summary of the essays in *God Without Measure*, seems to miss the import of this retraction. Oakes repeatedly insists that Webster arranges the immanent and economic works of God in "an inseparable, irreversible, and reciprocal sequence," but the last of this trio of descriptors is inappropriate in respect of Webster's latest work. See Oakes, "Theology, Economy and Christology in John Webster's *God Without Measure* and Some Earlier Works," 491. The triad appears again on pages 493, 496, 497, 499, and 502.
Oakes aims to show, by means of citations from Webster's earlier works, that these "theological judgements and intuitions [...] have long been present in Webster's thought." (499). Certainly, it is true that Webster speaks in terms of "strict reciprocity" between the essence of God and his revealed activity in *Confessing God*, and he hints at such a relationship elsewhere in his earlier works, as Oakes recognises. See Webster, *CG*, 87. However, Oakes' argument is insufficiently attuned to the shift in emphasis in the essays in *God Without Measure*. There, reciprocity is positively affirmed only in respect of the intra-Trinitarian relations, and God's essential being is consistently presented as the *foundation* of his works in the economy, in a way that, at the very least, nuances Webster's earlier work. The later Webster uses the language of "mutual reference" between the inner and outer works of God, and adverts to "argumentative devices of anticipation and recapitulation" in order to express this nuance. (See Webster, *GWM*, 1:51.)

32. Note that Webster does not seem to think that he himself suffered from this pathology,

particular, where God's being is act, and "God's act [is] principally understood as external (or externally manifest) operation in terms of its *terminus ad quem*," theology becomes "an extrapolation from the economy."[33] Second, Webster

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even in his earliest work. Karl Barth is also defended/commended by Webster as one who fought against this particular disease, despite criticisms of Barth's work by others along precisely these lines. See ibid., 1:56-57. A better way to characterise Webster's self-evaluation at this point is that he senses that his earlier formulations opened a door to potentially unwelcome developments. Webster's revised approach in his later period may then be interpreted, at least in part, as a (reactive) swing of a pendulum: Webster sees the problem, and so he makes a material dogmatic move in the polar opposite direction. The intention is to safeguard that which Webster thinks is endangered, namely, the preservation of the so-called "Christian distinction," (the phrase is Robert Sokolowski's) and thereby the right confession of God as, truly, *God*.

33. Webster, "Christology, Theology, Economy," 53. It is fascinating to compare the shift in Webster's approach with the two possible "methods of division [of the material of dogmatic system] that commend themselves," according to Herman Bavinck. For Bavinck, the first method follows the Apostles' Creed in beginning with the economic works particularly attributed to each Person of the Trinity, while the second method proceeds from the doctrine of God *ad intra* to God's works in the economy. As Bavinck notes, "the first-mentioned trinitarian method is not in itself objectionable," and there is "much that is appealing" about it, not least its "purely theological character" and "trinitarian scheme [which] guards against a barren uniformity and guarantees life, development, process." See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 111. We recall here Webster's own "remarkably emancipating decision to teach confessionally," in his Toronto days, "as a *conceptual expansion of the Apostle's Creed* as a guide to the Gospel that is set out in Holy Scripture." (Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics," 130-31. Emphasis added.) But, as Bavinck also recognises, this approach is potentially dangerous. "It can easily be speculatively misused," so that God is "drawn down into the process of history here," along Hegelian lines. It is likely that Webster himself came to a similar realisation. Bavinck's prescription for his preferred method is remarkably close to that followed by the later Webster. (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:111-12.)

In this connection, Bruce Pass records the following interesting anecdote, from his private correspondence with Garry Williams:

> Over lunch in an Aberdeen restaurant on 31st October 2011, John Webster was asked the following question by the external examiner of a doctoral thesis that he had been supervising [Williams]. 'When you have a theological question, to whom do you first turn on your shelves for help?' Webster replied, 'For many years it would have been Karl Barth, but now I would say Herman Bavinck.'

See Bruce Pass, "'The Heart of Dogmatics': The Place and Purpose of Christology in the Theological Method of Herman Bavinck," Ph.D. diss. (University of Edinburgh, 2018), 163.

developed the conviction that the lack in Barth of a robust doctrine of creation was a serious weakness. Without an account of the difference between God and the world that took creation seriously in its own right, Webster came to think that his own, Barth-influenced, earlier work was "dominated too strongly by the desire to run counter to naturalism,"[34] even suggesting he might have over-reacted in this respect "by appeal to revelatory and saving divine action *ab alio*."[35]

As the surest antidote to such pathologies, the later Webster insists on the dogmatic priority of the inner divine plenitude: God *a se*.[36] As we have seen from his introduction to *Confessing God*, the idea of beginning all dogmatics with God was not new for Webster. It was, as suggested above, one implication of his pursuit of "theological theology." But in his more mature constructive dogmatics, Webster's theology characteristically comes to begin with the fullness of God's Trinitarian being, articulating the divine presence to the world as the overflowing of God's fullness in the creation, preservation, reconciliation, and perfection of creatures. In different terms, the divine economy is constituted by the missions of the eternal Son and Spirit, missions which themselves reflect the eternal processions within the Godhead.[37] Webster acknowledges an experiential (and sometimes a pedagogical) priority to the human experience of God's outer works in the economy, but this is never allowed to compromise his conviction that the perfection of God *a se* must

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34. Webster, *CG*, x.

35. Webster, *W&C*, xi.

36. The influence of Thomas Aquinas, and the move away from Barth, is clearly discernible in this insistence.

37. Webster states his formal principle in a lecture which marks an important transition in his thought: "[D]ogmatic treatment of God's outgoing works has to be prefaced, and accompanied all along, by reflection about God in himself." See John Webster, "Series Introduction–Immanuel, God's Presence With Us," Kantzer Lectures (2007): accessed 15 March 2018, henrycenter.tiu.edu/resource/immanuel-gods-presence-with-us/.

have logical and ontological priority in dogmatics.[38] From this Trinitarian starting-point in the inner divine plenitude, Webster traces the outward works of God in the economy, in a (soterio-)logical progression through nature, grace, and glory.[39]

God's work of grace in the covenant establishes a created sphere that Webster, in his later essays, frequently refers to as "the domain of the Word."[40] This space is variously described by Webster as "the domain of the risen Lord's presence,"[41] "the domain in which all things come down from the Father of lights,"[42] "the domain of God's redemptive rule,"[43] and the "domain of the living Word," that "sphere of blessing" in which creatures are summoned into the fellowship of the reconciled that hears the voice of God.[44] It is usually synonymous with the "economy of grace."[45] Moreover, Webster asserts that the *Dominus* himself ontologically

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38. God has material priority in systematics, because "God is first in being," but the order of actual exposition is a matter of indifference, because it may well be better to reflect the order of knowing. See Webster, *GWM*, 1:46-47; John Webster, "Perfection and Participation," in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 393.

39. Webster finds explicit exegetical support for this approach in Eph. 1:3-14. Commenting on this text, he notes the repeated references to "God's wholly realized life." The plenitude of God's eternal being is connected to the economy by God's will, "directed to creatures as sovereign decision and determination in their favor." See Webster, "Perfection and Participation," 390-91.

40. The obvious advantage of the language of "domain" (over, say, "sphere," which is frequently employed in the essays in *Confessing God*) is that it includes the sense of the lordship of Jesus Christ as *Dominus*.

41. John Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture," in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Andrew Lincoln and Angus Paddison (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 38.

42. Webster, "*Regina Artium*," in *DoW*, 187.

43. Ibid., 190.

44. Webster, *DoW*, 19-20.

45. See, for example, John Webster, "The Human Person," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

constitutes his domain. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the doctrine that does this work. Possessed of, and revealed to be the embodiment of, divine life, Jesus bears all the divine attributes, and "[a]ll spatial and temporal realities are relative to him."[46] As Webster himself recognises, such a conception brings with it "startling implications for the metaphysics of created being."[47] The resurrection is ontologically determinative of all created being, so that "there is no creaturely existence apart from the risen one in whom it is held together." Indeed, "[t]he risen one *is* the domain within which the creation lives and moves and has its being."[48] Crucially, however, Webster no longer makes the resurrection *absolutely* determinative of the ontology of creation, as he had tended to do in his earlier work, but only *contingently* so. This is because the resurrection is "the temporal enactment of the eternal relation of Father and Son."[49] It is right and entirely fitting as an outward reprisal of the divine being that the Son of God should become incarnate, and undergo his passion, resurrection, ascension, and session for the sake of his creatures, but this economic history is not the fundamental ground of created existence: for *that*, Webster would have us look beyond the horizon of the Word's "domain" to the Word in his eternal bliss within the Triune God.

Webster's later understanding is succinctly laid out in the opening essay of the first volume of *God Without Measure*.[50] There, following Junius, the Leiden

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2003), 224.

In a later work, Webster writes that, "The economy is the domain of the divine missions." See John Webster, "*Omnia…Petractantur in Sacra Doctrina Sub Ratione Dei*. On the Matter of Christian Theology," in *GWM*, 1:9.

46. Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture," 34.

47. Ibid., 36.

48. Ibid. Emphasis added.

49. Ibid., 33.

50. Webster, "On the Matter of Christian Theology," in *GWM*, 1:4-10.

Synopsis, and the Lutheran theologian Johann Friedrich König, Webster takes his bearings from the sixteenth and seventeenth century theology of post-Reformation orthodoxy, itself grounded in the medieval tradition.[51] A further implication of beginning with God *a se* is that Webster follows Aquinas in his insistence that God does not have a real relation to creation.[52] The intention is not to situate God in some far-off realm where he is detached from and uninvolved in the lives of creatures. There is still, certainly, a "movement of love" that may be traced in the economy as the internally replete and self-sufficient God graciously wills to create and redeem a world. But this movement is now grounded in its deepest cause: the self-existent Triune life of God. The God who is in himself love is also a lover of creaturely life.[53]

Why does Webster's articulation of the relationship between God and creatures change in this way? Webster evidently comes to recognise the value of scholastic theology's "insert[ing] all these layers between God in himself and God's temporal acts."[54] His argument is that in this way, "God's outer works are most fully understood as loving and purposive when set against the background of his utter sufficiency."[55] This has the concomitant advantage that it truly grounds the graciousness of creation, because "the nature of creaturely being begins to disclose

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51. Webster, *GWM*, 1:6.

52. Ibid., 1:8. See also the essay, John Webster, "*Non Ex Aequo*: God's Relation to Creatures," in *Within the Love of God. Essays in Dialogue With Paul Fiddes*, eds. Andrew Moore and Anthony Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), repr. in *GWM*, 1:115-126.

53. See John Webster, ""Love is Also A Lover of Life": *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness," *Modern Theology* 29 (2013), repr. in *GWM*, 1:99-114. The language is Dorner's.

54. Webster, *GWM*, 1:6. We shall have more to say about these "layers" in the discussion of revelation below.

55. Ibid., 6.

itself as pure benefit, intelligible only as God is known and loved in his inherent completeness."[56]

Webster's later work thus reflects his view, expressed in 2015, that "the account of the difference between God and the world would be less abstract and more persuasive, as well as more relaxed, if it were articulated through a doctrine of creation."[57] In the later Webster, the doctrines of creation and providence form a sort of dogmatic bridge, by means of which God's relation to his creation may be described. The relationship between theology and economy is one that may be characterised as *re-presentation*.[58] The economy is said by Webster to be "suspended" from theology, because "[t]he economic drama does not go all the way down; it reposes on the eternal stillness of the triune being."[59] Other metaphors are also employed: the relationship between the inner and outer works of God is such that the latter are the "external face" of the former.[60] Or, God's inner processions are the "fountain from which the external works of God flow."[61]

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56. Ibid.

57. Webster, *CG*, x.

58. For the later Webster, the divine economy is that sphere of creaturely reality which is "founded in God's own life." See Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," 118. A similar account of the relationship between divine aseity and creatures is given in Mark D. Thompson, "The Trinity and Revelation," in *The Essential Trinity: New Testament Foundations and Practical Relevance*, eds. Brandon D. Crowe and Carl R. Trueman (Nottingham: Inter Varsity Press, 2017). Thompson praises Webster's insistence on the Trinitarian shape of God's aseity, and concludes that "[f]ar from being a barrier to revelation, God's aseity, trinitarianly considered, is its essential presupposition. Precisely because God is life in himself and sufficient in himself, and because this life and sufficiency has an *ad extra* as well as an *ad intra* dimension, the free act of revelation is possible without any compromise of his essential nature and character." See ibid., 246.

59. John Webster, "Webster's Response to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, Light in Darkness," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62, no. 2 (2009), 208, 207.

60. Webster, *DoW*, 117.

61. Ibid. We will see similar language employed by Junius in the next section.

If God's relation to creation is best understood as "rational" rather than "real," how should we understand the relationship of *creatures* to *God*? John Webster expressed consistent disapproval of the idea of creaturely "participation" in God, even as he came to draw more heavily on Aquinas.[62] If there is "participation" in Webster's theological anthropology, it is "participation in the drama of creation, salvation, and consummation."[63] Elsewhere, Webster describes divine election as intending what he calls "intimate, asymmetrically ordered fellowship between uncreated and created."[64] The questions then arise: how does this covenantal fellowship work, and what sort of account can be given of the human and divine agencies by which it is constituted? Such anthropological concerns lead us into a consideration of Webster's moral theology, still at this point with our wider focus on the God-world relation.

3.2.2 The Works of Man, in Covenant Fellowship with God

No account of the relation between God and creatures can be complete without some consideration of *creaturely* ontology and agency. This sub-section contains discussion of Webster's treatment of human "moral ontology," human eschatology, and human agency. Some comment on Webster's ecclesiology is also included here, because for Webster the church is the proper social "location" of human ethical action in covenant with God. Lest it be forgotten, the church, thus defined, is also the location for the reception of Holy Scripture, and Scripture is itself the product of moral human agents in covenant fellowship with God. Herein lies the necessity of this particular section for this thesis as a whole.

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62. See, for example, his comments in ibid., 14n27, 24-25, 126-27, 138, 140.

63. Webster, "The Human Person," 227.

64. Webster, "Perfection and Participation," 393.

In the previous sub-section, we have observed what Michael Allen has called Webster's "relentless concern to speak of all things only in relation to God."[65] It is this relentlessness – which only seemed to intensify as his career developed – that sometimes gives Webster's theology the "other-worldly" air observed in chapter one. Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that Webster was also concerned with created space, with humanity, and with human moral agency.[66]

Late in his career, Webster summarised "the moral theological task of dogmatics" as being that of "assembl[ing] a description of creaturely moral nature: the moral being, powers and conditions of human agents considered under the aspect of their origin and end in God, and their historical course between first and final cause."[67] Webster argues that moral theology and dogmatic theology should not be separated: "Moral theology is an exponent of dogmatics, yet not in such a way that there occurs a shift away from its matter, but only an amplification prompted by that matter's full scope."[68] Such moral theology then becomes a sort of (necessary and preliminary) spring-board for the development of practical-ethical theology, because "inquiry into nature precedes attention to circumstances."[69] Before we can

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65. Michael Allen, "Toward Theological Anthropology: Tracing the Anthropological Principles of John Webster," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, no. 1 (2017), 7.

66. It is for this reason – to be explained and defended below – that Dekker's complaint, namely that the later Webster "creates a metaphysical theology in which humanity and human experience are not directly involved" is going too far. Dekker argues that Webster's approach "gives these articles [in *God Without Measure*] something abstract [*sic.*]" The sense of abstraction in Webster's later work may be acknowledged, without conceding the full force of Dekker's critique. See Dekker, "John Webster's Retrieval of Classical Theology," 61.

67. Webster, *GWM*, 2:1.

68. Ibid., 3.

69. Ibid.

ask what human agents ought to do, we need to know what the human agent *is*, and within what context he or she has been placed.

Webster's approach may be summed up in terms of three fundamental principles. First, the space in which human agents live and move and have their being is *given*. It is not first and foremost a space to be acted upon, less still to be "made" (hence Webster's aversion towards ungrounded "poetics"[70]) but one to be accepted or received.[71] Second, as a consequence, this space is always defined and interpreted in its relation to God. There is no possibility of a "secular" space that is constituted without reference to the one who is creator, sustainer and reconciler of all things. Third, human beings who inhabit this given space have a (divinely-given) vocation to act in correspondence with their own nature, and with the nature of the space that they occupy. These three principles form the foundation of Webster's "moral ontology."[72]

Webster consistently sees the concepts of createdness and "givenness" as definitive of what it means to be a human being. Nevertheless, as we might expect,

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70. See, on this point, John Webster, "Hope," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, eds. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 302. Elsewhere Webster writes that, "in Christian theology poetics is tantamount to idolatry." See Webster, *Holiness*, 16. In bibliology, putting reception before metaphysics "risks making the text into an occasion for a poetic act on the part of its readers." See Webster, *DoW*, 45.

71. There is "a law of creation in which we are to discern the structure of created being and in which, therefore, we encounter a summons to act fittingly, as the spatial creatures we are." See Webster, *CG*, 104.

72. The concept of "moral ontology" was first articulated by Charles Taylor. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 8. Webster borrowed the term and applied the idea in his exposition of Barth and Luther, accepting Taylor's proposal that "moral space" is "an essential component in achieving identity as a human agent." See Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 152. ("Moral space," like "moral ontology," is Taylor's term.) Webster's own use of the idea of "moral ontology" is characterised above all "by reference to the action of God." See ibid., 153.

there is some diachronic change in emphasis. For the earlier Webster, there is little if any discernible difference between the created sphere interpreted naturally on the one hand, and in its graced inflection on the other.[73] Rather, all nature is graced. In the same way, creation and covenant tend to appear as overlapping realities, although grace is always the more fundamental and more powerful reality than (fallen) nature. To be human is thus to be elected to covenant fellowship, *as a consequence* of being created. All human beings are, by virtue of creation, both "in Adam" *and* "in Christ."[74]

For the later Webster, on the other hand, to be human is to be created as part of a sphere of nature which possesses its own ontological integrity, independent of, yet still in a sense preparatory to, the covenant. The fallenness of humanity "in Adam" (standing for the natural sphere) gives rise to the contingent necessity of divine election to covenant fellowship "in Christ" (standing for the sphere of grace).

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73. See, for example, some of the many references to this created sphere in *Confessing God*. Webster can refer to it – with evident overlap of meaning – as "the economy of God's revelatory and reconciling grace," "a sphere which is illuminated by the presence of the risen Christ," "the ecclesial sphere," the "sphere of the knowledge of God," "that sphere of human life invaded and annexed by God," the "sphere of human life and fellowship in which God is known, loved and praised," "the sphere of reality whose resplendent centre is Jesus Christ himself," the "sphere of reality over which Jesus Christ presides as the enthroned Lord who is before all things and in whom all things hold together," and "a sphere of knowledge of him." (Webster, *CG*, 3, 43, 54, 60, 70, 111, 137, 138.) In yet another reference, Webster writes of "the world and its history as an economy, a shaped sphere in which God's creative, reconciling and perfecting acts precede, enclose, judge, vindicate and consummate the works of creatures." See ibid., 197.

Perhaps the best way to describe the relationship between the two ways of approaching the created sphere in this period of Webster's work is as one of concentric circles. The entire created order is "enclosed" by the sphere of Christ's lordship, to which – or to whom – it is ultimately (eschatologically) sublated by means of divinely-effected reconciliation.

74. These points are expressed clearly in Webster's sermons, collected in Webster, *The Grace of Truth*, repr. as *Confronted by Grace: Meditations of A Theologian* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015). See, especially, his sermons entitled "The Great Contrast," "The Triumph of Divine Resolve," and "Yes in Christ."

While there is still a tendency in the later Webster to apply both spheres in practice to the entirety of created humanity, there is a discernible shift towards maintaining at least a theoretical distinction between the two.[75] To be human is therefore to be elected to covenant fellowship, not as a necessary implication of having created or "natural" being, but as a consequence of God's gracious and super-natural initiative in Jesus Christ.[76]

Some of these tensions between nature and grace – and Webster's attempts to resolve them, or at least to hold them faithfully in tension – are on view in his third Kantzer lecture (2007) which focuses on the theme of God's presence.[77] In that lecture, Webster discusses the omnipresence of God to creatures, divine providence, and the covenant. Formally, Webster works by proceeding through what he calls "two concentric circles." The outer circle is that of God's omnipresence (his "providential ordering of all things to their appointed end") and the inner circle describes the history of the covenant. This inner circle is "the chief matter of

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75. Webster has, in general, little to say about the *imago Dei*. Perhaps if he had developed this concept it would have helped him to clarify his doctrine of protological and eschatological man. By way of exception, note Webster's comment that by means of (ecclesial) fellowship, one may "resist the relationlessness of sin into which [one] may drift, and, remade by Christ and animated by the Spirit, [...] realize [one's] nature as one created in the image of God." See Webster, "The Human Person," 233.

76. The opening up of some theological "wiggle room" by means of this distinction might have allowed the later Webster to develop a concept materially similar to the Reformed notion of "common grace." In his later conception where creation precedes the covenant there is evidently a place for God to bestow non-salvific favour on a fallen, natural sphere. Nevertheless, Webster resists such an articulation, perhaps because he remains suspicious of any gracious manifestation of God (or of God's favour) that is not "self-presentation," and therefore reconciling in force. More will be said about common grace and general revelation in chapter six below.

77. John Webster, "Lecture 3: God is Everywhere But Not Only Everywhere," *Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology. Perfection & Presence: God With Us, according to the Christian Confession* (2007): accessed 12 December 2018, https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/resource/god-is-everywhere-but-not-only-everywhere/.

revelation."[78] At the centre of both circles is "the history of Immanuel." Each circle is "in its distinctive way, a sphere of God's active presence." Webster explains that this arrangement of the material reflects the classical division of the external works of God into the work of nature and the work of grace. The two spheres are held together by the fact that "in them, the one God is at work."[79]

More may be said about the relationship between the spheres, by means of the doctrine of providence. In invoking this doctrine, Webster says, "we are edging closer to the inner circle of the work of God's grace."[80] Providence is "ordered towards" the special history of God's dealings in the covenant. Indeed, "[p]rovidence surrounds and supports the covenant of redemption"[81] so that "[t]he goal of providence is the union of all things in Christ." As for the inner circle, in special, covenant history, "God's primal relation to creatures is enacted." "[T]he particular history of the covenant is universal history," because it is the continuation of the

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78. This is so because the covenant of grace is God's saving, self re-presentation to the ultimate end of the redemption of lost creatures, *i.e.* revelation. The history of the covenant is that of God's redemptive acts in his Son and his Spirit to this end. Again, this is revelation: God himself in his turn to creatures. There would seem to be some place here for a general or "natural" revelation, in the acts of God through his Son and his Spirit in creation, although Webster does not make this clear.

79. Webster insists that the work of nature is not independent: it is "a preface to, or a setting for, the work of grace." That is because "the outer circle acquires its true significance from the inner circle." We cannot have knowledge of "pre-evangelical, general truths" about the outer circle (of nature, presence and providence) without the history of Immanuel, because the works of nature "serve the history of redemption."

80. Ibid.

81. Webster possibly means the covenant of grace, rather than what is traditionally called the "covenant of redemption" in Reformed theology. He does treat of the intra-trinitarian covenant (*pactum salutis*) elsewhere. See John Webster, ""It Was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him": Soteriology and the Doctrine of God," in *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective*, eds. Ivor Davidson and Murray A. Rae (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), repr. in *GWM*, 1:143-157.

history of Adam after the Fall. It therefore "circumscribes, recapitulates, and brings to fulfilment" all other history.[82]

As an apparent barrier to the fulfilment of the history of God's relation with creatures, Webster admits that there is "a dark and inexplicable accompaniment to the history of the covenant, namely, the continuance of Adam's sin." This is to be explained as "a terrible absence of the creature from God, a not-happening of the creature's existence in response to God's call." Sin, Webster acknowledges, is "real human history," but at the same time it is "a kind of negation: non-occurrence of the covenant from the side of the creature": "[s]in is not being, but non-being."[83] God's response to this sin is to "check" it, since it always remains within his power.[84] God will not allow sin the final word, because "[t]he creature's failure to be with God is met with the intensification of his presence."[85]

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82. Webster, "God is Everywhere."

83. Ibid.

84. Once more, this is not quite the same as affirming "common grace" in the Kuyperian sense, because God's checking of sin in this way is, for Webster, better considered an aspect of his *saving* grace. Webster does have his own version of the Reformed "antithesis," in his recognition of "the incomplete, mixed character of history" (Webster, *GWM*, 2:168) and his allowance of a present distinction between church and world. But the tendency of his overall argument is to affirm that, fundamentally, all of the world is the recipient of saving grace and stands (or will eschatologically be revealed to stand) in what he calls the "evangelical condition." For an influential treatment of common grace in Reformed theology, see Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for A Fallen World* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016).

85. Webster, "God is Everywhere." In the Q&A following this lecture, Webster is asked whether his account of providence and the covenant in this lecture might shed any light on the doctrine of hell, a doctrine in respect of which Webster is typically silent. In reply, Webster cautions that, "if you go in certain directions you end up having to cut out a certain amount of the canonical witness. On the other hand, if you go in another kind of direction, you can end up very quickly in a kind of dualism, in which God reaches a limit." It seems that Webster finds himself caught between a rock and a hard place: on exegetical grounds, he cannot affirm *apokatastasis*, but theologically he is conscious of the dangers of circumscribing the divine will and power to save, because of the potential descent into dualism. After some thought, Webster concludes that any acceptable doctrine of hell, under

It is fundamental for Webster that the world is a divine gift, and as gift it has the property of having been *given*. Reality has its own "shapely givenness" to which the acts of human beings should correspond "in glad consent."[86] This reality is given first in creation, the "initial donation of being," in which "God bestows finality, a tendency or active bent and movement towards the completion of [...] nature."[87] The creation of humanity *ex nihilo* is for a particular purpose, the fulfilment or attainment of which demands human action in response to divine initiative. Further, the fulfilment or attainment of this purpose is an ability con-created with man. There is no need for a *donum superadditum* in order for natural man to attain to his created purpose: here Webster is decidedly Protestant. "To be created out of nothing," Webster writes, "is not to suffer deprivation but to be given a nature whose performance will certainly involve acts of courage and may include – for example – magnanimity and magnificence, the extension of spirit to great things, the performance of some great work."[88]

The eschatological goal of humanity (the completion of nature) since the Fall requires revelation, or covenantal grace, for its realisation, and this is given by God in the temporal and redemptive missions of the Son and the Spirit. First, the original givenness of creation is perpetuated in God's "providential maintenance" of his world.[89] In addition to this, the givenness of the world *now* (after the Fall) includes its reconciliation in the new state of affairs brought about by the covenant of grace. As we have noted above, Webster understands the whole world to have been brought

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the topic of God's rule, will need to affirm that "God's self-glorification includes his continuous triumph over that which opposes his will and repudiates its own being."

86. Webster, *W&C*, 64.

87. Webster, *GWM*, 1:111.

88. Ibid., 113.

89. Ibid., 123.

into the "evangelical condition." Indeed, he can say that "the world and human society are a certain kind of place; they are the new creation, the place where the creative and redemptive purposes of the triune God have been established and are now moving to their final perfection."[90] There is a strikingly realised tone to this eschatological vision, even acknowledging its concession that there is a "final perfection" which awaits. This final perfection is the sphere of glory, and is the ultimate destination of reconciled man in covenant with God.

For Webster, then, the givenness of the human situation is both protological and eschatological in its shape. Moral action is bounded – and demanded – both by humanity's *origin* in the creative work of God, and by humanity's *destiny*, which is secured by the redemptive work of God. The indicative of reconciliation gives rise to an ethical imperative, just as does the indicative of creation. In what Webster calls "the realm of regeneration," believers "have to inhabit and fill out the new nature given to them."[91]

Such an account raises the issue of moral agency. This was indeed one of John Webster's perennial ethical concerns, represented by the question that Webster poses in one of his earliest essays on moral theology: "[H]ow may we elaborate an account of the Christian as agent without thereby surrendering the notion that the roots of Christian agency lie beyond ourselves, in deeds done without either our permission or our participation and which entirely transform our situation before God?"[92]

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90. John Webster, "The Church as Witnessing Community," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21 (2003), 32.

91. Webster, *GWM*, 2:152.

92. John Webster, "Christology, Imitability and Ethics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39, no. 3 (1986), 310.

Contrary to accounts that pit givenness and teleology against freedom, or divine sovereignty against human agency, Webster insists that *inhabiting* or *filling out* of nature is in fact true freedom. "Freedom," he writes, is "the capacity to realize what one is."[93] It is a given, and is always freedom *within* situations.[94] "Human freedom is, in short, that which we are given as we live in the space of fellowship which is made by God's free acts setting us free."[95] The process of moving towards final perfection demands, as we have noted, human ethical action. But how is this action to be characterised? In Webster's earlier ethical work, he evinced suspicion towards the categories of virtues and practices.[96] His concern was that such language threatened to immanentise or psychologise the Christian life in its eschatological directedness, and so he preferred to advert to the "intrusive" concepts of mortification and vivification.[97] By 2015, however, Webster was offering another "retraction," in line with his newly-developed conviction that a robust doctrine of creation, "especially about God as the one who moves and perfects creaturely movements," should guard against the perceived dangers in appealing to human virtues.[98] When turning to a consideration of Webster's doctrine of Scripture, we shall see how his later approach to habits and virtues maps on to his account of what it means to be a reader of Scripture in the domain of the Word.

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93. Webster, *CG*, 223.

94. Ibid., 224.

95. Ibid., 225.

96. See, for example, Webster, *W&C*, 45.

97. Ibid., 84. Mortification and vivification remained important aspects of Webster's moral theology. See, for example, Webster, *Holiness*, 23. Compare also his late essay, John Webster, "Mortification and Vivification," in *GWM*, 2:103-21.

98. Webster, *W&C*, xii.

Webster thus consistently resisted a competitive understanding of divine and human agency, from his early defence of Barth's ethical project on this point,[99] to his later insistence on divine/human complementarity in a scheme of double agency:

> God is not one of an array of causes, but the cause of causes, the cause by virtue of which there is created causality. As cause of causes, God is not in competition with the causes that he creates. God wills creaturely causes, bringing them into being by limitlessly abundant goodness. Because God is in every way replete, he loses nothing by their existence or action. Created movements – precisely because they are brought into and preserved in being and motion by the one who is antecedently and infinitely full – present no obstacle or inhibition to God, and his causing of them does not oppose their operation or dignity.[100]

In this section on moral theology it remains to offer a brief account of Webster's ecclesiology. Here the focus will be on Webster's doctrine of the church in its most developed form (*i.e.* in his latest published work). For Webster, the church is the principal sphere within which human ethical action in fellowship with God takes place. He defines the church as "the human assembly which is the creaturely social co-efficient of the outer work in which God restores creatures to fellowship with himself."[101] As he has argued at different points during his career, Webster

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99. See, for example, his books: *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*; *Barth's Moral Theology*; *Barth's Earlier Theology*.

100. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 248.

As we shall see in the next chapter, there are some interesting implications of this understanding of agency for a doctrine of Scripture. To touch briefly on one of those here, Webster argues that Barth's use of the terminology of "witness" and "servant" as "leading motifs for discussing the active life of the Christian" is driven by his desire to maintain the "gracious origin" and "sustaining energy" of human agency in the agency of God. This is notable because Webster (like Barth) will go on to employ these same terms when he speaks theologically of Scripture. See Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 97.

101. John Webster, ""In the Society of God": Some Principles of Ecclesiology," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), repr. in *GWM* 1:177. The church is also the "social coordinate of Scripture," even as it is the "social location of Scripture." By tying these two ideas together, Webster insists on specifically *theological* definitions of both Scripture and church. (See Webster, *DoW*, 43.)

insists that ecclesiology cannot be reduced to sociology, nor can the social sciences be an appropriate starting-point for understanding the church.[102] Webster is aware that his ecclesiology is liable to be criticised for its idealism or extrinsicism. But he seeks to defend it by means of a precise definition of the nature of the "mixed" relation between God and creatures, so that even if ecclesiology is social history, it is "a social history which is one long reference to its origin in God's goodness."[103]

Webster interprets the church as "society within the *foedus gratiae*."[104] The church is in fact the covenant of grace in its human manifestation, undeniably a social-historical phenomenon, but at every point shaped and sustained by God: brought into existence by the eternal will of the Father, conditioned according to the "ecclesiologically elemental" moments of "the eternal deity of the Son, his temporal mission as reconciler, and his exaltation as the one under whose feet are all things," and perfected by the Holy Spirit.[105]

This understanding of the church maps on to Webster's account of causation and agency discussed above. Since, according to the Bible's metaphysics, "the motion of God and the motion of creatures are not inversely but directly proportional" so that "the more God moves the creature, the more the creature moves itself," Webster argues that the acts of the church must be described by reference to acts of God.[106] This leads him to a discussion of the "fundamental forms"

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102. Webster, ""In the Society of God": Some Principles of Ecclesiology," 179.

103. Ibid.

104. Ibid., 183.

105. Ibid., 184, 187-188.

106. Ibid., 188.

of the church, of which the examples of assembly, hearing the divine Word, and order are treated.[107] More will be said about the second of these in chapter four.

Having described in general terms how John Webster understands the relation between God and creatures, in largely ontological and moral terms, we now turn to his distinctive doctrine of revelation. Here, ontology and ethics continue to play a significant part in the discussion, but epistemology also comes to the fore.

3.3 Revelation

For the earlier John Webster, revelation is not, properly speaking, a doctrine: "Appeal to revelation is more like a *modus operandi* which pervades the entire dogmatic corpus, and which is a corollary of other primary doctrines (notably, the doctrines of Trinity and salvation)."[108] Revelation is a concept that both flows from, and in a sense undergirds, what may be said about both God in himself (thus, theology proper, or God considered in his divine immanence) and all things in relation to God, or God in his outer works of the creation, reconciliation, and perfection of creatures (the divine economy). What, then, does John Webster understand by "revelation"?

We begin with the "earlier" Webster. From a number of possible, similarly-worded, sources,[109] we may follow his account of revelation from an essay of 2001.[110] In an important paragraph, Webster states seven times what "revelation is," and

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107. Ibid., 190-93.

108. Webster, *W&C*, 25n. In his later work, Webster does speak of the "doctrine of revelation." See Webster, *DoW*, 4.

109. Most obviously, his specific treatments of revelation in Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 11-17; Webster, *Holiness*, 12-14.

110. John Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of the Canon," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43, no. 1 (2001), repr. in *W&C*, 9-46.

once what "revelation is not." Here our method is to break down Webster's account according to these statements, and then draw out some key themes. According to Webster, revelation is:

> that differentiated action of Father, Son and Spirit in which God establishes saving fellowship with humanity and so makes himself known to us [..;] the free work of God in which the mystery of God's will is made manifest and generates the knowledge and obedience of faith. [..;] an event or mode of relation[111] [..;] God's self-presentation to us [..;] God's eloquence [..;] reconciliation [..; and] a work of grace.[112]

In the only negative statement in this paragraph, Webster says that "[a]s divine *self*-manifestation, revelation is not merely the communication of arcane information, as if God were lifting the veil on some reality other than himself and indicating it to us." The account above may be summarised under three headings: (1) revelation is God's *act*; (2) revelation is God's *being* (in its orientation to the creature); (3) revelation is *salvific*.[113]

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111. It is not immediately clear what Webster means when he describes revelation here as a "mode of relation." The phrase appears again in another article, in which Webster (following Barth) describes God as "eloquent and radiant": "To speak of the light of God is to speak of a personal action and mode of relation, the free self-disposing of the Lord of all things existing towards and with his creatures." Webster, *CG*, 40.
Revelation is therefore that communicative event in which God relates to his creatures by means of free self-disposition *pro me*. The idiom is Barthian. For the language of God's "disposing," in the context of Barth's account of "the happening of revelation," see Karl Barth, *CD*, II.1, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 268.

112. Webster, *W&C*, 27-28.

113. It is acknowledged that these headings are somewhat arbitrary. However, given the foregoing analysis of the wider dogmatic context, the discussion here need not drift into reductionism. In addition, these three headings may usefully be compared with the three characteristics of revelation central to Herman Bavinck's view, identified in James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards A New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 138. The first and second are basically the same, although the second in particular is parsed quite differently in Bavinck. The third differs in that Bavinck makes it explicit that the *telos* of revelation goes beyond the salvation of creatures to (the glory of) God. Revelation has *God* as its purpose. Webster does not say this in so many words, although he would probably have accepted the idea.

First, revelation is God's *act*. For Webster, revelation is something that the Triune God *does*: "God is the agent of revelation."[114] In common with all the divine *opera ad extra*, the Father is the "root or origin" of this work, the Son is the executive agent, and the Spirit is the agent of its perfection.[115] We may characterise the nature of this act as, in the first instance, epistemological: it is predicated on God's communicative eloquence, and thereby God's making himself known to creatures. It is, however, by no means *only* an epistemological act: it has ontological implications.

Second, then, revelation is God's *being*. For Webster, revelation is something that the Triune God *is*: "God is the agent of revelation who is also the content of revelation."[116] Revelation is the self-presentation of God.[117] "[T]he *content* of

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114. Webster, *W&C*, 28.

115. Ibid., 27-28.

116. Ibid., 28.

117. Johannes Hoff argues that the application of the concept of self-revelation as a "unifying principle" is the most important characteristic of modern theology, even though he thinks it is mostly "adopted somewhat unreflectively." See Johannes Hoff, "The Rise and Fall of the Kantian Paradigm of Modern Theology," in *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism*, eds. Peter M. Candler Jr and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM Press, 2010), 181, 168. Webster is certainly to be situated within this modern tradition, despite his reservations about modernity rehearsed in the previous chapter.

Nevertheless, some aspects of Hoff's thesis may legitimately be questioned. First, he argues that the "self-revelatory turn of modern theology" has led to a situation in which "[t]he distinction between Trinity and economy evaporates to a theoretical background assumption." (Ibid., 189.) As we shall see below, Webster is careful to avoid this particular consequence (and also to defend Barth from the charge even when he comes to distance himself from Barth). Second, Hoff thinks that the concept of self-revelation is "anything but biblical in origin." (Ibid., 168.) It seems that Hoff is rejecting, not merely the mis-application of the concept as part of a "modern identity-assurance strategy," but *any* legitimate biblical roots for the idea whatsoever. (Ibid., 183.) However, exegetical work since Hoff's critique has established more than a mere projection of the idea of self-revelation on to "decontextualised Bible verses." (Ibid., 168.) See, for example, with a particular focus on the Fourth Gospel, Gerald O'Collins, *Revelation: Toward A Christian Theology of God's Self-Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). From a more strictly theological point of view, drawing on biblical evidence, the concept of self-revelation has been shown to be demanded

revelation is God's own proper reality [...] its content is identical with God."[118] Or, perhaps most succinctly, revelation is "identical with God's triune being in its active self-presence."[119] As we have noted in the previous section, the earlier Webster's doctrine of God was characterised by actualism, in this respect similar to Barth's theology.[120] In expressing this point, care must be taken lest we think that even the earlier Webster thinks of revelation as the being of God *without remainder*. It is more precise to say that revelation is the being of God in its external turn to creatures, in what we have seen Webster refer to as the "second movement" of the divine being. Likewise, Wittman has argued convincingly in respect of Barth that the Swiss theologian does not suggest that revelation is identical with the *essence* of God. Rather, revelation remains an *outer* work of God, in which work we contemplate "reiterations of God's being freely inclining toward us."[121] As we have

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by the Bible's testimony to God's eternal relatedness in Thompson, "The Trinity and Revelation."

118. Webster, *Holiness*, 13. Compare Barth: "[a]s God reveals himself, so is he." See Karl Barth, *CD*, I.1, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 304.

119. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 14.

120. Webster never followed Barth slavishly. Barth's focus on Jesus Christ as the both subject and object of revelation, meant that he could speak of "Jesus Christ" as revelation. Webster, even in his earlier period, did not follow Barth in this language, preferring a Trinitarian approach even when the concept of the "Word" of God was to the fore. Later, Webster would express the difference in stronger terms: "[I]t is not Christology *per se* but a doctrine of God's triune being and his inner and outer works (including the godhead of the Son and his works in time) which occupies the pre-eminent and commanding place in Christian teaching." Webster, *GWM*, 1:43.

121. Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 132. The equation of revelation with God without remainder is of course a Hegelian move, one often followed by theologians who are discontented with the use of classical metaphysics in articulating the doctrine of God. See Hoff, "Rise and Fall," 186-90. Hoff notes that "the modern concept of 'self-revelation' crops up for the first time in Hegel. (Ibid., 187.)

Tseng suggests that Hegelian thought "is often unwittingly introduced" into theology at this point. In this sense, the argument here is not that the earlier Webster (or Barth, for that matter) was "Hegelian" *per se*, but rather the much more limited claim that the influence of Hegel may be detected in the equation of revelation with God's being. (Tseng, *Hegel*, 102.)

seen, the earlier Webster could define God's internal being-in-act in terms of his acts in the economy, so that the work of God *ad extra* was understood in some sense to be determinative or constitutive of the works of God *ad intra*. To put this another way, for the earlier Webster, there was no essential being of God "behind" his revelation.

Later, in line with his scholastic "turn," Webster introduced a clearer distinction between the being of God in its orientation to the creature, and the being of God *in se*. The latter was interpreted as the ultimate ground of the former. In the most basic terms, this is a shift *from* Barth *towards* Aquinas. While registering the over-simplification, Wittman suggests that "Aquinas maintains that God's external acts correspond to God's internal being, whereas Barth maintains that God's external acts correspond to God's internal acts."[122] Just so, following Aquinas, the later Webster seeks to ground revelation in the metaphysical essence of God in his plenitude, quite apart from the creation of the world or any other divine economic activity.[123] This shift did not happen overnight, and it is possible to identify some interesting transitional moments. Webster seems to have moved away from Barth, not directly to Aquinas, but first in the direction of the nineteenth century mediating theologian Isaak Dorner. In a 2006 contribution on "God's Perfect Life" to a book on the Trinity, Webster sets out his subtly shifting view of the relationship between God's immanent and economic perfections.[124] While God's perfection is integral to

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Barth's confessed fondness for "doing a bit of 'Hegeling'" is well known. His admission along these lines comes from a letter of 1953, and may be found in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 387.

122. Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 16.

123. In Sarisky's words, "what [God] does in manifesting himself is the *unfurling* of who he is himself in his own immanent life." See Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 6. Emphasis added.

124. John Webster, "God's Perfect Life," in *God's Life in Trinity*, eds. Michael Welker and Miroslav Volf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

God's immanent being, "in revelation God reiterates and re-presents his perfect being in his *opera exeuntia*."[125] In expressing the relationship between the two, Webster notes his preference for Dorner's earlier (and, Webster thinks, more precise) formulation of God's *self-preservation*, and his *self-communication*, over Barth's terminology of God's *freedom* and his *love*.[126] In his self-preservation, God

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125. Ibid., 145.

126. Ibid., 146. For Dorner's use of the language of God's "self-preservation" and "self-communication," see Isaak A. Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, new and revised ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1888), 1:443-44. The influence of German Lutheran mediating theologian Isaak Dorner (1809-1884) on the later Webster (particularly in his understanding of the relation between God's immanent perfection, and the representation of God's being in his economic turn to creatures) is significant. Almost entirely absent from Webster's previous works, Dorner nevertheless becomes an important conversation partner in the first volume of *God Without Measure*, where Webster refers to Dorner's "extraordinarily perceptive treatment of the doctrine of God." See Webster, *GWM*, 1:18, and see also 22, 54-55, 90, 108, 110, 137-40.

Reading the pages of Dorner's *A System of Christian Doctrine*, the similarities with Webster are striking. One example is Webster's essay, "Love is Also a Lover of Life," the title of which is a quote from Dorner in his section on "The doctrine of God's revelation of himself in a world, or of the economical Trinity." See Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, 2:15. Compare with Webster, ""Love is Also A Lover of Life"," repr. in *GWM*, 1:99-113.

Compare also Dorner's emphasis on God's πλήρωμα in his definition of the absolute life of God, with Webster's explicit invocation of the divine πλήρωμα, and indeed Webster's appeal to the "plenitude" of God in an essay on divine aseity which specifically draws on Dorner. See Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, 1:259; Webster, *GWM*, 2:7; John Webster, "God's Aseity," in *Realism and Religion: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, eds. Andrew Moore and Michael Scott (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 147.

Indeed, in general the language used by Dorner in articulating his doctrine of God is echoed by Webster across the essays in *God Without Measure*. Consider in particular the following summary by Dorner, which might as well have been penned by Webster:

> Neither to supply a deficiency in His perfect Essence, nor on account of a superabundance of which he is supposed not to be master, God, of His perfection and blessedness in love, sets forth as a really second object a world, which he calls out of non-existence into existence, that, loved and loving, it may be a relatively self-dependent image of His perfect triune nature and attributes.

See Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, 2:9.

Despite his favourable reception of Dorner, Webster retains concerns that the German theologian allows "the order of knowing (from economy to theology)" to dictate the material order. (See Webster, *GWM*, 1:55.)

reiterates his own plenitude. It is the "restricted, nonspeculative, and dogmatically determinate sense" in which we may speak of "God's being in becoming."[127] Such "being in becoming" is "not a state resulting from an original act of self-constitution,[128] but an eternal, ever-fresh act of self-reiteration and being self-realized."[129] (Divine) epistemology and (divine) ontology coinhere in this act: "God knows himself and all things by his own being."[130] The fullness of this "infinite knowledge" is, as Webster observes, "incommunicable."[131] God's self-communication (his *presence*) is from this fullness (his *perfection*): this is indeed to be interpreted as his overflowing, superabundant love.[132] Thus "God communicates his absolute

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127. Webster, "God's Perfect Life," 147.

128. Here, Webster notes implicitly in passing his dissatisfaction with so-called "revisionist" approaches to the work of Karl Barth, represented by Bruce McCormack and others, according to whom God's being is constituted by his decision to be the Triune God who is for us in Jesus Christ. For McCormack's construal, see in particular the seminal article, Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Another hint in this direction by Webster is in the review article, Webster, "Webster's Response to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, Light in Darkness," 208.

129. Webster, "God's Perfect Life," 148.

130. Webster, *DoW*, 136.

131. Ibid., 137.

132. For the language of "perfection" and "presence" see in particular the unpublished Kantzer lecture series, John Webster, "Perfection & Presence: God With Us, According to the Christian Confession," *Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology* (2007): accessed 19 January 2019, http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/resource/immanuel-gods-presence-with-us/. In these lectures, as Sarisky notes, God's perfection is the "ground" of his presence, which presence is a "function" of his perfection. See Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 3, 5.

Sarisky argues that these lectures are "the closest thing we have now to a synthesis of Webster's theology." Indeed, the two "motifs" of presence and perfection "give texture to all of Webster's theology." (Ibid., 3, 6.) The terminology of "perfection" and "presence" has, in the later Webster's vocabulary, a semantic range very close to that of "self-preservation" and "self-communication."

life."[133] There is still a residual tendency in this essay to ascribe a form of reciprocity to the internal and external works of God. Webster writes that "self-preservation and self-communication, though they are not identical, are *equiprimordial*."[134]

In later essays, as we have seen in the previous section, the doctrine of God's aseity comes to the fore, as the deepest ground of God's self-presentation.[135] It is the being of God that is unfurled in revelation, and the *theological* direction of this unfurling (as opposed to the necessary order of knowing or exposition) is one-way. In her assessment of Webster, Katherine Sonderegger seems to overlook the change in Webster's thinking at this point. Sonderegger juxtaposes citations from the earlier and later Webster, suggesting that the composite figure who emerges "shaped a Doctrine of God in which relation to the creature is *integral* and *essential* to the Inner Being of God."[136] Such "relationalism" rightly captures the earlier Webster's view, but because Sonderegger fails to register the diachronic shift described above, she finds Webster to be self-contradictory, even self-conflicted. Webster has, on her reading, made space for "the very enemy in the camp," "against all instincts and commitments."[137] In contrast, according to the reading suggested here, Webster did indeed make the necessary adjustments in his later work, and he no longer retained the language of "inclusion" in his account of the economy's relation to the essence of God.[138]

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133. Webster, "God's Perfect Life," 150.

134. Ibid.

135. See Webster, "God's Aseity"; John Webster, "Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God's Aseity," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), repr. as "Life in and of Himself," in *GWM*, 1:13-28.

136. Sonderegger, "God-Intoxicated Theology," 40.

137. Ibid.

138. Sonderegger's "speculation" on how Webster's doctrine of God might have developed

What is strikingly modern in Webster is that this unfurling of the divine being in the economy is *historical*. Martin Westerholm has observed this distinctively modern strand that persists in Webster's thinking, despite his deepening interaction with pre-modern theologians.[139] In his later essays, Webster describes a "further reality" (alongside the primal reality that is the incommunicable being of God) which he identifies, in scholastic terms, as ectypal theology.[140] This reality is "a genuine creaturely cognitive history." It is the "temporal unfolding" of

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thus seems to miss the point that Webster was aware of the potential problems, and *did* in fact develop the sort of nuances she suggests. In *DoW*, the "inclusion" that Webster allows is that of God's glorifying himself in the eternal purpose of his will to glorify creatures. See Webster, *DoW*, 7.

139. See Martin Westerholm, "On Webster's *God Without Measure* and the Practice of Theological Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, no. 4 (2017), 447. Indeed, this is a common acknowledgment among modern Reformed theologians standing in the confessional tradition. Both Herman Bavinck (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:379-80) and Geerhardus Vos agree that "history is revelational, and revelation is historical." On this point, see Tseng, *Hegel*, 81.

Alex Tseng suggests that confessional Reformed theologians gained this insight from Hegel, *viz*. "that the ahistorical and atemporal became knowable to human beings only by becoming historical and temporal." The difference from Hegel is, of course, that neither Bavinck, nor Vos (nor Webster) accepts that history is in any sense divine. Tseng's summary of Vos at this point is equally applicable to the later Webster, who "identif[ies] divine revelation as an act of God that is external to, and yet deeply reflective of, his being. This analogical correspondence between God's works *ad extra* and his being *ad intra* finds its center in Jesus Christ." (Tseng, *Hegel*, 81.) But Webster's position is certainly distinct from that of Vos and Bavinck: this point will be examined in greater detail in chapter five.

140. The following discussion depends on Webster, *DoW*, 137-39. The idea of revelation as historical was not, of course, a late development in Webster's thinking, and was articulated much earlier in many of his essays. Consider, for example, the following striking paragraph from Webster, *CG*, 88.

> God's identity becomes a matter for dogmatic explication because it expounds itself in and through the history of God's engagement with humanity, God's creature, sinner and child caught up in the judgement and renewal of all things. That history is the drama of God's self-exposition; in it and through it, the *essentia dei* sets itself forth with majestic force and mercy. The divine *essentia* may not be constructed in advance of or in isolation from that history, nor may that history be considered in advance of or in isolation from the antecedent perfection of God.

See also the statements along similar lines in ibid., 125, 198; Webster, *W&C*, 27.

archetypal theology: "[a]rchetype and ectype are related not ideally and statically but historically in the course of creation, fall, election, reconciliation and glorification."[141] This Webster refers to as the "history of revelation."[142] It is the means by which the divide between the uncreated and created, the Creator and the creature, may be bridged: in this historical revelation of God there is established "a loving movement from archetype to ectype which establishes a fitting proportion between divine and created *scientia*."[143] This re-presentation of God's being in its creaturely orientation is revelation.

But the later Webster draws a distinction between the "form or medium" of revelation (*modus revelationis*) and the "matter" of revelation (*revelata*). These are not to be identified, but both are to be considered under the *locus* of revelation.[144] For all that it is historically unfolded, then, there is a sense in which revelation remains epistemologically and ontologically immediate, even as it is necessarily *received* in accommodated form.[145] Webster does not frame the issue in precisely these terms, so this claim demands some explanation and substantiation. What can it mean to say that there is a sense in which revelation remains "immediate"? Is not all revelation delivered by means of created signs? This is certainly true, but Webster's account of revelation suggests greater complexity. We have seen that for Webster, God reveals *himself* in the divine economy. This revelation "unfolds as the

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141. Webster, *DoW*, 140.

142. Ibid.

143. Ibid.

144. See Webster, *GWM*, 1:6. It is somewhat ironic that the later Webster makes a form/content distinction such as this, given his previous criticism of the Reformed orthodox for making a form/content distinction in respect of the *verba* and *res* of Holy Scripture.

145. As Webster writes, "[t]his accommodated form is Holy Scripture." (Webster, *DoW*, 138.) The concept of accommodation will be explored in detail in chapter five below.

history of fellowship" between God and creatures.[146] Crucially, this fellowship is two-sided. On the divine "side" it takes the form of the divine Word, quickening to love and knowledge: on the creaturely side, it is the enactment of knowledge and love.[147] Epistemologically, then, revelation may be approached from the point of view of either God's self-knowledge, or accommodated human knowledge of God. Webster writes,

> This is the most basic meaning of 'revelation': the eloquence of God's presence and activity, God so acting in relation to creatures that his actions constitute his address of them. In his presence and activity among creatures, God's relation to creatures is not simply one which produces an objective effect; it also communicates to creatures a measure of God's own knowledge of himself.[148]

God's self-knowledge is axiomatically incommunicable. Yet somehow, in revelation, "a measure" of it is communicated to creatures. Ontologically, likewise, revelation spans the Creator-creature distinction, depending on how it is viewed. It is both (considered *simpliciter* or absolutely) the being of God in its turn to creatures, and (considered *secundum quid* or relationally) the accommodated, creaturely form of that being, which is in Webster's view best described according to the language of *signum* (or witness) to the *res* signified.[149] A formal comparison may be made with

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146. Ibid., 117.

147. Ibid., 118. In the same essay, Webster expresses this two-sidedness in alternative language when he writes that "the term 'divine economy' bears two closely related senses: it is both the work of the triune God in which he administers the temporal order of creaturely being and activity in accordance with his eternal purpose, and also the sphere of creaturely reality so administered by him: both God's act of *dispensatio* and that which he disposes." (Ibid., 115.) Key to understanding the significance of this distinction is the fundamental principle that the "divine economy" in *both* of these senses is the locus of revelation.

148. Ibid., 118.

149. For more on the language of signs in the later Webster's bibliology, see the discussion in the next chapter.

It should be noted that the duality in the later Webster's concept of revelation described here is not the same as the distinction he makes between "objective" and "subjective" revelation.

the Roman Catholic distinction between uncreated and created grace. *Uncreated* grace is God himself, given to creatures. *Created* grace is the result of God's communicating himself, and is in creaturely form. Both, in the Roman Catholic view, may be understood as "grace." Here we have, it is suggested, something *formally* similar to Webster's presentation of revelation.[150]

Third, revelation is *salvific*. This emphasis remained constant throughout Webster's work. As his account of revelation from 2001 makes clear, in revelation God "establishes saving fellowship with humanity." The preposition is important: saving fellowship is not established *by* or *through* revelation, but *in* it. Salvation is ingredient to revelation. Indeed, revelation includes both the gracious and loving creature-ward movement of God, *and* generates the God-ward response of knowledge and the obedience of faith in the human recipient. Again, revelation is not "instrumental" in achieving this: revelation just *is* this. This explains why, for Webster, revelation may be described as God's "*saving* self-manifestation": "[R]econciliation is the more comprehensive concept for what is being talked of by revelation."[151] Or simply, as we have noted above, "revelation is reconciliation."[152]

Objective revelation is "God's glory *ad extra*." (Ibid., 57.) It is like a light that shines in the darkness, irrespective of whether it is apprehended, or active in enlightening. Subjective revelation, on the other hand, is the recognition in the human subject that takes place as a result of divine illumination. As Webster writes, "[i]llumination is subjective revelation in its reconciling and regenerative effectiveness." (Ibid., 62.) This objective/subjective distinction is, however, significant, and we shall have cause to return to it later.

150. At the risk of labouring the point, it must be stressed that there is no suggestion of material correspondence here. Webster does not work with the categories of uncreated and created grace, as he follows the Reformed in their insistence that "grace" is interchangeable with the gift of God himself.

151. Webster, *W&C*, 27. Emphasis added.

152. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 16. "Revelation is a term for Jesus Christ's merciful outreach in which he creates fellowship with lost sinners, and 'revealed' knowledge is that knowledge which occurs in the course of the reconciliation of sinners to whom it has been given to perceive the glorious self-movement of the reconciler." See Webster, *CG*, 135. See also Webster, *Holiness*, 13.

The same point is expressed in different language in Webster's later work: for example, he writes that "[t]he divine economy [in which God's revelation is manifest] includes the history of redemption."[153]

The earlier Webster distinguished his own view of revelation from one which is *merely* epistemological ("the communication of arcane information") and unrelated to the being of God ("as if God were lifting the veil on some reality other than himself.") Webster does not say here whose view of revelation he has in mind, but it is evident from elsewhere in his work that he has in mind the formal problem of modernity discussed in chapter two above. Thus, in the modern paradigm revelation was "expounded generically" without the necessary Christian "positivity" and "determinacy": this left the doctrine "eviscerated."[154] Yet at the same time, Webster could lament the "hypertrophy" of the doctrine of revelation which, in modernity, "migrate[d] to the beginning of the dogmatic corpus, and ha[d] to take on the job of furnishing the epistemological warrants for Christian claims."[155] This, Webster thinks, was the particular error of those for whom "revelation and Scripture are strictly identified."[156] The culprits are named in other essays as the post-Reformation orthodox.[157]

In respect of post-Reformation orthodoxy, it is important to discern how exactly the scholastic account of revelation was formulated, in order to enable a nuanced comparison with Webster. This comparison will be of particular use as we move into the specifics of Webster's doctrine of Scripture in the following chapters.

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153. Webster, *DoW*, 118.

154. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 12.

155. Ibid.

156. Ibid.

157. Webster, *W&C*, 9. See also ibid., 66n. As we have noted above, Webster later modified his view of the Reformed orthodox, in this and other respects.

Recognising that Protestant orthodox theology was by no means a monolithic entity (even among Reformed writers) the French scholastic theologian Franciscus Junius (1545-1602) will be treated as representative of this period. Junius is discussed here because Webster specifically interacts with him.[158]

To understand what Junius says about revelation, we need to grasp first his all-important distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology, which the later Webster also employs. This distinction has been a commonplace in much subsequent Reformed theology, and it did not entirely originate with Junius, but derives from medieval and Reformation-period precedents.[159] For Junius,

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158. John Webster interacts directly with Junius in *GWM*, 1:3-4. Webster does not comment there on the archetypal/ectypal distinction, so central to Junius' scheme, but he uses the categories in Webster, *DoW*, 139. Here, Webster writes (echoing Junius) "[a]rchetypal theology is God's self-knowledge; ectypal theology is the knowledge of God possible for finite rational creatures."

The scholastic distinctions made by Junius and detailed in this section were highly influential on the developing traditions of both Reformed and Lutheran dogmatics. Willem J. van Asselt cites the following examples of Reformed theologians who either summarised, broadly followed, or even more-or-less verbatim reproduced Junius, in his introduction to Junius' *Treatise on True Theology*: Polanus, Alsted, Polyander (in the Leiden *Synopsis*), Wollebius, Voetius, Leydecker, van Mastricht, Turretin, Cocceius, Burman, J. H. Heidegger, Heidanus, Braun, Owen, Baxter, and even Arminius. See Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology With the Life of Franciscus Junius*, trans. David C. Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), xliii-xliv. Bavinck also follows Junius' distinctions in his discussion of the "scientific foundations" of dogma. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:212-14.

159. Henk van den Belt notes that Junius was the first Reformed theologian to introduce this distinction. See van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust*, 134.

As van Asselt writes, "[a]ccording to Junius, the concept of archetypal and ectypal theology can be traced back to the medieval scholastic distinction between divine self-knowledge and human knowledge of God." Junius, *Treatise*, xxxii. Van Asselt further observes that,

> [a]ccording to Junius's contemporary Amandus Polanus (1561–1610), professor of theology in Basel, the distinction between divine and human knowledge can be traced back to Scotus's commentary on the *Sententiae*, where he introduced the concepts of *theologia in se* and *theologia nostra*. [...] Arguably, the distinction of archetypal and ectypal theology also stands in continuity with early Protestant thought. According to Muller, traces of it can be found in Luther's distinction

archetypal – or "prototypical" – theology is "the very essence of God," just as it is God's knowledge of himself. It is "uncreated wisdom, essential, absolute, infinite, in all aspects simultaneously present."[160] Archetypal theology includes the works of God *ad intra*. It is thus, by definition, necessary and, because of the Creator-creature distinction, incommunicable.

Ectypal theology, on the other hand, is accidental, contingent, and finite, a theology of the free will of God. Junius describes it as the outflow and efflux[161] of prototypical theology. Significantly, in Junius' taxonomy of theologies, *both* archetypal *and* ectypal theologies are species of the same divine wisdom, even though one is uncreated and the other created. Archetypal theology is "the divine wisdom of divine matters. Indeed, we stand in awe before this and do not seek to trace it out."[162] On the other hand, ectypal theology, "is the wisdom of divine matters, fashioned by God from the archetype of Himself, through the communication of grace for His own glory."[163]

Next, Junius differentiates between an *internal* and *external* concept of ectypal theology. The *internal* concept of ectypal theology (Junius calls this *theologia simpliciter dicta*, or *theologia in se* = "theology in itself") is in the mind of God, although it is always to be carefully distinguished from the divine essence (archetypal theology). It equates to the will of God, directed in grace towards

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between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis* and in Calvin's distinction between the eternal word of God and the revealed Word of God. [*sic*. The capitalisation in this sentence seems to be confused.]

See ibid., xxxiii-xxxiv.

160. Ibid., 110.

161. His translator uses the word "emanation." Junius employed the Greek ἀποῤῥοὴ. See ibid., 111.

162. Ibid., 107.

163. Ibid., 113.

creatures, and differs from archetypal theology in that it is communicative and communicable. This compares with the *external* form of ectypal theology (*theologia secundum quid*, or *theologia in subjectis* = "relational theology") according to which God communicates his mind to human beings.[164] The relationship of ectypal theology in itself to ectypal theology in relation is that of a source (*fons*) to a lake (*lacus*).[165] The external form of ectypal theology is communicated to creatures (human subjects) in three distinct ways. First, it is communicated to Christ by means of union (*unione*). Second, it is communicated to angels and to the blessed in heaven by means of vision (*visione*). Third, it is communicated to pilgrims in this life by revelation (*revelatione*). Crucially, the external form of ectypal theology is always *mediated*, even when communicated to Jesus Christ.[166] Junius does not use the precise language of mediation, but his editor Willem van Asselt correctly notes that ectypal theology in its relational form is, by definition, "a mediated and communicated theology."[167]

The most important distinctions described above may be presented in tabulated form:

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164. Ibid., 116.

165. Some years later, Amandus Polanus (who followed Junius' distinctions quite closely) described the internal concept of ectypal theology as "the inexhaustible storehouse (*thesauri*) from which flows whatever God graciously desires to communicate to his rational creatures." See Stephen Tipton, "Defining "Our Theology": Amandus Polanus on the Fundamental Task of the Theologian," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10 (2016), 302.

166. At this point, Junius departed from Lutheranism. A consequence of the Lutheran doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* was that Jesus' human nature received archetypal theology from his divine nature in the hypostatic union.

167. Junius, *Treatise*, xxxvii.

Archetypal theology.	**Incommunicable** (God's essence) and necessary.
Ectypal theology in its internal concept.	**Communicable** (in the mind of God) and contingent, absolute (*i.e.* not related to anything else).
Ectypal theology in its external concept.	**Communicated, mediated** (accommodated to creaturely knowledge as revelation). Includes both Scripture and our rational understanding of it.

For comparison with Junius, Webster's understanding may be tabulated according to his "earlier" and "later" views. First, the "earlier" Webster is like this:[168]

God's self-communication (the being of God in its "second movement") = the revelatory missions of Son and Spirit.	**Communicated** to creatures by an act of grace, and necessary.
The being of God in its "first movement."	Delimited (and mysteriously also **communicated**) by the above act of revelation, with which it is in reciprocally-defining relation.

Second, the "later" Webster's understanding is like this:

168. There are parallels with Barth's distinction between God's primary and secondary objectivity. The former is God's immediate objectivity to himself. The latter is his mediated objectivity to the human knower. See Webster, *Barth*, 77-78.

God's perfection (self-preservation) or archetypal theology.	God's essence, necessary, **incommunicable** and **immediate**. The ground of God's presence.
God's presence (self-presentation) or ectypal theology = God's reiteration of his perfect being in revelation.	God in historical, saving, covenant fellowship with creatures, communicating God's perfection in history by a contingent act of grace, **communicable** and **communicated**, having both an **immediate** and a **mediate** aspect.

How does Junius' understanding of God and revelation compare with Webster's? We may begin with what they hold in common. The way that the later Webster lays out the definitions of, and divisions within, theology is explicitly dependent on Junius and indeed on the wider tradition since Duns Scotus: significant common ground is therefore to be expected. Both theologians acknowledge that the Triune God is the agent of revelation.[169] Both would accept the designation of revelation as a work of divine grace to sinners *post lapsum*. Again, Junius and Webster would agree that human beings have no direct access to the knowledge of God, as God knows himself. Terminologically, there is a difference in that Webster includes in "revelation" all that Junius means by "ectypal theology," whereas for Junius revelation is one mode of communication of ectypal theology's relational aspect, which in its written form is Holy Scripture. But there are also two more fundamental differences, one ontological and the other soteriological.

169. In his description of the work of revelation Junius writes in Trinitarian terms of God (the Father) "communicating by revelation through the Spirit [...] toward those persons who dwell on earth, called saints and heirs of the saving promises in Christ Jesus." (Junius, *Treatise*, 138.)

The first difference concerns how ontology and epistemology are related in the doctrines of God and revelation. For Junius, as we have seen, ectypal theology is divided into its internal and external concepts. Junius calls ectypal theology *secundum quid* a "second order" theology, as opposed to ectypal theology *simpliciter dicta*, which he considers to be "first order," as it is in the mind of God. Axiomatically, "first order" theology, though it is communic*able* to creatures (we might describe it as *theologia communicanda*[170]), is immediate, and it is not until it takes accommodated form that it is communic*ated* to creatures (*theologia communicata*) by a mediated "second order." Communicated theology is, in other words, a step removed from the mind (and being) of God, although it flows from the divine mind in analogical proportion to its archetype.

We may compare this with the Webster, for whom "revelation" means *both* the immediate, saving presence of the eternal God (*revelata*), *and* at the same time the historically-unfolding, creaturely-conditioned way by which God gives himself to be known, traced to its enlightening term in the knowing human subject (*modus revelationis*). This sounds rather like Junius' account of ectypal theology, but the difference is that Webster never develops anything quite like Junius' internal/ external distinction. Rather, the absolute and relational aspects of revelation tend to be either considered together without distinction, or else, where they are (more commonly, especially in Webster's later work) conceptually distinguished, they remain terminologically subsumed under the general term, "revelation." If we were to apply Junius' terms to Webster's account, we might say that for the latter, *both* "first order" theology *and* "second order" theology are communicated to creatures by a miracle of divine grace. For Webster, in other words, revelation is not just an

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170. Junius does in fact use this particular form (the future passive participle) in Franciscus Junius, *Summa Aliquot Locorum Communium SS. Theologiae*, Book 1, Chapter 6, 1816.

epistemological category: it is ontological. Revelation is the being of God, in God's historical turn to creatures.[171]

The second difference concerns the relationship of revelation to salvation. Junius clearly distinguishes revelation as a means by which God communicates the external concept of ectypal theology to creatures *in via*, from the human response of faith that grasps that theology.[172] Revelation is certainly salvific in its *intent*, but it is not to be equated with God's work of reconciliation. For the earlier Webster, in contrast, "revelation" and "reconciliation" are two ways of looking at what is ultimately the same divine act. Even his later distinction between objective and subjective revelation is not intended to admit of non-reconciling revelation. Revelation *includes* regenerate reason's reception, internalisation, and systematisation of God's self-communication by the missions of Son and Spirit, in the context of saving fellowship.

The lack of a clearly-defined internal/external distinction *within* the doctrine of revelation itself, and the definition of revelation as a soteriological "success word,"[173] means Webster loses a certain amount of "wiggle room" in his account of God's self-communication to creatures. Certainly, compared to his earlier account, the later Webster opened up more conceptual "space" for understanding revelation as the self-presentation of God. Webster himself employs this "space" language,

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171. Webster, *DoW*, 138. The implications of this for Webster's doctrine of Scripture will be developed in chapters five below, where the category of "accommodation" will be considered in depth.

172. Junius, *Treatise*, 138.

173. The language of revelation as a "success word" is not Webster's, but it reflects his understanding, one which is shared by many other modern theologians. Colin Gunton, for example, (following Christoph Schwöbel, who in turn cites philosopher Gilbert Ryle) designates revelation a "success word" because revelation is participation in that knowledge of God that is salvific. See Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 113.

when he argues that modern Protestant divinity has tended to "close the space between God absolutely considered and God relatively considered."[174] His own developing concern was to preserve this conceptual (and metaphysical) space, yet the suggestion here is that his account is not as "spacious" as it might have been. We recall how Webster registered the value of "all these layers" in the scholastic doctrine of God. The implications of Webster's effectively collapsing or conflating certain of these layers will be explored and assessed in detail in chapter five.[175]

One final point must be addressed here in making a comparison between Webster and Junius. We noted above Webster's criticism of doctrines of revelation that are *merely* epistemological and unrelated to the being of God. Would this be a fair criticism of Junius? On one level, it would seem to be fair. Junius, as has been demonstrated, purposely inserts what Webster calls "all these layers" into his doctrine of God, and ensures that revelation is not seen to impinge on God's being. He is demonstrably different from Webster in this respect. On another level, Junius must be exonerated of such supposed problems. His account of revelation as the means by which ectypal theology is communicated to creatures, flowing out from the gracious, decretal will of God (itself an outflow and efflux of the incommunicable

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174. See Webster, *GWM*, 1:53.

175. We may note here in passing a comparison with Herman Bavinck. Bavinck's definition of revelation as the "self-disclosure of God" sounds much like Webster's "the self-presentation of God." There are a number of similarities between their respective approaches. Like Webster, Bavinck insists that revelation, as having its origin in the free act of God, must be held in the closest relation to theology proper: God is the origin, the content, and the purpose of his revelation. But, crucially, Bavinck operates with a more variegated understanding of the forms of revelation than does Webster. For Bavinck, these forms of revelation evince "infinite difference": here is Bavinck's "wiggle-room." As we shall see, this means that when Bavinck distinguishes Scripture from revelation, he is not making the same move as Webster, but is in fact closer to Junius at this point. See Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 34-36. Bruce Pass also makes a comparison between Bavinck and Webster in "spatial" terms, in Pass, "'The Heart of Dogmatics': The Place and Purpose of Christology in the Theological Method of Herman Bavinck," 131.

divine essence) clearly relates revelation to the divine being. But the *quality* of the relation is conceived differently, more spaciously. Junius' account, rooted in medieval and Reformation distinctions, and articulated in Trinitarian terms, certainly cannot be accused of lacking Christian determinacy. What, then, of Webster's criticism of those for whom "revelation and Scripture are strictly identified," making the doctrine of revelation a semi-independent, epistemological justification? This charge, likewise, does not easily stick on Junius. It is true that Junius can write of revelation as being "perfectly contained by the Spirit of God in the instrument of His sacred Scripture."[176] Yet, it must be remembered that by "revelation," Junius does not mean the unmediated self-presentation of God's being. He is in fact at pains to maintain the "imperfection" of Scripture in comparison with the perfection of God and God's self-understanding. Junius does not mean that Scripture errs in what it asserts, and is therefore lacking in perfection. Rather, he means that the prophets and apostles, while receiving a "perfect" divine revelation, were unable perfectly to comprehend or express that revelation, as a consequence of their createdness.[177] Again, this is not to suggest that Junius thinks of Scripture as incomplete *qua* revelation, but rather that revelation by Scripture is (formally and materially) as much as pilgrims *in via* can bear.[178] In short, Holy Scripture is an inscripturated form of revelation. Revelation is not, in Junius' work, a non-theologically-determined aspect of prolegomena. It is, ironically, better interpreted as an element in something rather like what John Webster would call the "domain of the Word": a space that is shaped by the Triune God for the loving work of making himself known to lost creatures. We will return to Junius in chapter five, when

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176. Junius, *Treatise*, 231.

177. Not, it should be noted, as a consequence of their sinfulness. The inability here is ontological, not ethical.

178. Ibid., 223.

considering how John Webster parses the relationship between the divine Word and the words of Scripture.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a wide-angle approach to John Webster's theology from the point of view of the God-creature relation. In the first section we considered Webster's account of dogmatic and moral theology respectively, attentive throughout to the relationship between the creator and his (particularly human) creatures. Against competitive views of human and divine agency, Webster offers as an antidote a view that emphasises the "humanly basic" given of createdness, at the same time "teaching about God's presence in the Spirit, sustaining all things in their created integrity."[179] A consideration of Webster's moral ontology is significant for his account of Scripture and its readers, not least because he himself argues that his moral ontology has a parallel in the "textual and hermeneutical ontology" of Holy Scripture. We shall observe how this parallel lines up below.

Next, following Webster's deployment of the concept of "revelation" in his dogmatics, we have seen how this is understood as the essential Triune God, in his turn to the creature. This understanding remains largely intact, even as the "turn" comes to be considered in its (distinguishable) natural and gracious ramifications. We have noted the differences between Webster's view of revelation and that of Reformed scholasticism (represented by Franciscus Junius) and also the widening gap in relation to Karl Barth's view of revelation as Webster reworked the doctrine of creation on more Thomistic lines later in his career. Junius, Barth, and Aquinas will re-appear as important conversation partners in the chapters to follow.

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179. Webster, *DoW*, 188.

Webster has set the stage for the understanding of Holy Scripture as a created element in the domain of the Word, both *produced by*, and – at the same time, by means of sanctifying grace – *set over-and-above* God's covenant-partners, to serve divine revelation. These ideas will be developed in the next chapter.

§ 4. John Webster's Doctrine of Scripture: Foundations

4.1 Introduction

Having described the various contexts in which John Webster's doctrine of Scripture was developed, and specifically the *theological* context within which it must be interpreted, it is now appropriate to give direct attention to his bibliology. It is the concern of this chapter and the next to explicate the detail of this doctrine as Webster expounds it, before moving to a systematic assessment in the final chapter. In chapter five, the focus will be on what is arguably the central critical issue in Webster's doctrine of Scripture, namely, the relationship between the divine Word – or "revelation" – and the human words of the Bible. As will become evident, the wider question of the God-creature relation is crucial to interpreting that issue. A critical interaction with Webster's bibliological deployment of the concepts of providence, sanctification, and inspiration will be offered there, in relation to this overarching question.

This present chapter comprises two main sections on the material aspects of John Webster's doctrine of Scripture. The title of the first section is, "Scripture and the Hands of God."[1] Here, with a primary focus on *divine* agency, it is shown how Webster's doctrine of Scripture developed in the contexts of (1) his critique of modernity as described in chapter two, and (2) his broader theological account of revelation and the God-creature relation, which was the subject of chapter three. This is followed, second, by a description of Webster's account of the agency of the *human* hearers, readers, students, and preachers of Holy Scripture, in the location of

1. The allusion is, of course, to Irenaeus of Lyons, who famously described the Word and Wisdom of God, or the Son and the Spirit, as the two "Hands" of God. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.1.

the church.[2] This section is entitled, "Scripture in the hands of men." All of this is prefaced by some preliminary remarks about diachronic development, and some comment on formal considerations.

Webster's doctrine of Scripture is best understood, as in the previous chapter, as developing from an "earlier" to a "later" phase.[3] The first phase saw the publication of his *Dogmatic Sketch*, and other essays from around the period 2001-2005, some of which were reprinted in *Word and Church*.[4] The second phase is represented by the collection of essays in *The Domain of the Word*, which were all originally published between 2006 and 2012.[5] Also in this later phase, Webster published two articles which are significant for understanding how his thinking had

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2. Webster also has much of interest to say about the place of Scripture in the academy, some of which has been touched on in his critique of modernity in chapter two above. See, for example, Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 107-35. For the purposes of this thesis the focus will be on the church, because the underlying material aspects of the doctrine of Scripture, as they relate to the God-creature relation, are the same.

3. Fred Sanders finds evidence that the later Webster had a "significantly new position" in respect of the doctrine of Scripture. See Sanders, "John Webster's Trinitarian Doctrine of Scripture," 5. Sanders' reading of precisely *what* is "significantly new" will, however, be questioned below.

4. Essays from these years reprinted in *W&C* include Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of the Canon"; Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology"; John Webster, ""In the Shadow of Biblical Work": Barth and Bonhoeffer on Reading the Bible," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 17, no. 1 (2001), repr. as "Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer."
Other relevant works from this period include John Webster, "Reading Scripture Eschatologically (1)," in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, eds. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM Press, 2003); John Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew *et al.* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004); Webster, "Purity and Plenitude."

5. For example, all of the following important essays appear in *DoW*:
Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture"; John Webster, "Illumination," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5 (2011); Webster, "T. F. Torrance on Scripture"; John Webster, "Karl Barth's Lectures on the Gospel of John," in *What is it That the Scripture Says? Essays on Biblical Interpretation, Translation and Reception in Honour of Henry Wansborough OSB*, ed. Philip McCosker (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

developed by the end of his life.[6] The developments in Webster's doctrine of Scripture parallel the shift from the "earlier" to the "later" Webster in the general periodisation of his constructive work proposed above.

For Webster, the doctrine of Scripture (and more broadly, the doctrine of revelation) has been misplaced in most modern dogmatics. As we have seen in chapter two, Webster laments the "pathology of modernity." It is particularly in respect of the doctrine of Scripture that theological culture has failed to offer a suitable remedy to this pathology.[7] In formal terms, post-Enlightenment theologians brought revelation and Scripture into their theological *prolegomena*. Their purpose was to offer an epistemological justification for their entire dogmatic system. However, in Webster's view, this was to put undue pressure on – and thereby to "hypertrophy" – these doctrines, making them the foundation of all dogmatics, or the hinge on which systematic theology turns. Webster refers to this misplacement/ displacement as the "unhappy alienation" of the doctrine of Scripture from its "proper doctrinal habitat."[8]

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6. John Webster, "Holy Scripture," in *Between the Lectern and the Pulpit: Essays in Honour of Victor A. Shepherd*, eds. Dennis Ngien and Rob Clements (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2014); Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture." This final essay in particular suggests tantalising clues as to the possible future trajectory of Webster's work on Scripture had he lived, although detailed speculation is beyond the scope of this thesis.

7. Webster, *DoW*, 4. The language of "theological culture" is Webster's. Elsewhere he writes of "the high theological culture of the Protestant West." See Webster, *W&C*, 53. See also his published lecture: John Webster, "Culture; Texts; Traditions," *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 6, no. 4 (1998). This lecture (along with the entire series of "Burns Lectures" from New Zealand) will be reprinted in the forthcoming volume: John Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, eds. Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

8. Webster, *DoW*, 4. For the language of "hypertrophy" and "atrophy" in respect of the doctrine of Scripture, see Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 238.

Webster argues in response to modernity that bibliology is properly a derivative doctrine.[9] Questions about Scripture's nature and interpretation are therefore to be treated "indirectly, that is, as corollaries of more primary theological teaching about the relation of God and creatures," for "we will remain unclear about Scripture as long as we are unclear about God, providence and church."[10] The formal sequence in Webster's work on Scripture thus reflects the ordering we have observed in the previous chapter. Webster grounds his doctrine of Scripture in his theology proper: the fullness of the Trinitarian divine life from which flows the economy of grace, the "domain of the Word," of which Scripture and its interpretation are "sanctified" human elements.

In summary, for John Webster, Scripture must be received, and dogmatically accounted for, in the context of the revelatory missions of the Son of God and the Spirit of God – Irenaeus of Lyons' two "Hands" of God. In other words, it is not *sufficient* to describe Scripture in terms of its undeniable creatureliness. For Webster, as we have seen in the previous chapter, there is a sense in which revelation is immediate: it is the being of God. But revelation is also always mediated to creatures.[11] Scripture is, now, the principal instrument of that mediation in the economy of grace. For Webster, Scripture is never a *species* of revelation, but its

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9. See, for example, Webster, *DoW*, 3.

10. Ibid. Providence will be considered in detail in chapter five below.

11. This is taken for granted on the basis of the Creator-creature distinction, *i.e.* that between the infinite and the finite. In his earlier work, Webster tended to follow Barth in his view that revelation is intrinsically an (ontological and ethical) impossibility, made possible by a miracle of divine grace. Later, Webster maintained the idea that "there is no antecedent readiness in the creature" for receiving divine revelation, while insisting that the operation of the Word of God in revelation is not a "denial of the creature's ways." He developed a view according to which created humanity is naturally (by creation) fitted for the reception of a form of mediated revelation suited to its capacities, and which is directed towards humanity's fulfilment of its divinely-appointed ends in glory. (Ibid., 138.) See more on this important point below.

servant.[12] This underlying assumption is a necessary consequence of Webster's understanding of "revelation" as presented in chapter three. Webster argues, in short, that Holy Scripture is a creaturely phenomenon[13] which is sanctified[14] for divine use by the Spirit, to serve the Word of God in the covenant of grace. This definition is presented as a Trinitarian, "dogmatic ontology" of Holy Scripture. In the sections that follow in this chapter, the various material aspects of this definition will be developed.

4.2 Scripture and the Hands of God

In one of his latest articles, Webster proposes a structure for a balanced bibliology according to five material "topics."[15] These may be summarised (alliteratively, and not precisely in Webster's idiom) as the (1) place, (2) provenance, (3) properties, (4) purposes, and (5) practical uses of Scripture.[16] Webster's article

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12. The mediateness of Scripture is nuanced, qualified, and stretched almost to breaking-point in some of Webster's later work, but Webster never gives it up. For example, in an article from 2007, Webster writes the remarkable sentence: "To say 'Scripture' is to say 'revelation', not just in the sense that these texts are to be handled as if they were bearers of divine revelation, but in the sense that revelation is fundamental to the texts' being." (Ibid., 38.) At the same time, in this article, Webster insists that Scripture is a "*creaturely auxiliary* of the exalted Lord's self-proclamation." (Ibid., 40. Emphasis added.)

13. Or, perhaps better, a cluster of creaturely realities. The plural reflects the complexity of the phenomena which together constitute the entity that is Holy Scripture.

14. "Sanctification" is, for Webster, a "middle term" between divine revelation and the nature of Scripture. It serves as a conceptual way out of the divine/human dualisms of modernity. In the next chapter, this concept will be considered in more detail. See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 9.

15. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 236-37. Webster also calls them five "elements" of the doctrine of Scripture.

16. In the place of "provenance," Webster writes of *the "causes or authorship of Holy Scripture*." "Practical" has also been added to Webster's "uses of Scripture." These changes are purely cosmetic: no change of meaning is intended.

exemplifies the formal principle discussed above: his rule is that "the *principium* of the doctrine – God and his communicative works – precedes the *principiata* – the human causes of Scripture, and its human recipients."[17] Webster interpreter Brad East parses this in such a way that the first three topics are understood as "primarily 'divine' matters," in contrast with the final two topics, which concern the use of Scripture in the church. This is broadly right, although on Webster's understanding of the God-creature relation and his compatibilist account of double agency, it is important to recognise a sense in which all five topics in Webster's doctrine of Scripture are *primarily* divine, and *secondarily* human. In respect of each element, *contra* modernity, divine action comes first, but each is also a facet of the interplay between divine and human agency. However, a suitable division of the material has to be made somewhere. Therefore, in this section (*Scripture and the Hands of God*) the place, provenance, and properties of Scripture are discussed. In the following section (*Scripture in the hands of men*) are treated Scripture's purposes and practical uses. Methodologically, the focus remains throughout on the God-creature relation, and so not every aspect of Webster's bibliology will be covered here.[18]

4.2.1 Scripture's *Place*: A Dogmatic Ontology

From the earlier phase of development in his bibliology described above, through to the end of his career, John Webster consistently strove to articulate what he called a "dogmatic ontology" of Holy Scripture. It is a dogmatic *ontology* because

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17. Ibid., 237.

18. This methodological and critical focus ensures that the present chapter is not a mere repetition of Webster's article. Furthermore, although this chapter formally parallels East's treatment of Webster's bibliology, it has different priorities. For example, East's concern is with Webster's doctrine of Scripture in *ecclesial* focus, and because he thinks that Scripture's attributes "are not crucial for understanding Webster's bibliology or his ecclesiology," he devotes little space to discussing them. See East, "The Church's Book," 125.

Holy Scripture is indeed "a thing" with a definable essence, albeit one which may not be descriptively subsumed under general categories but must be interpreted *sui generis*.[19] In the terms of classical scholastic theology, therefore, Webster's answer to the question "*An sit*?" in respect of Holy Scripture is a resounding "Yes!" It is a *dogmatic* ontology because the subsequent questions of Holy Scripture's quiddity ("*Quid sit*?") and quality ("*Quale sit*?") must be answered in accordance with its location in, and relation to, the divine economy. Thus Webster pursues "an account of what Holy Scripture *is* in the saving economy of God's loving and regenerative self-communication."[20] In the previous chapter, this divine economy has been described in relation to both *God* as creator, sustainer, redeemer, and perfecter of all things, and to *created human beings* in the spheres of nature, grace, and glory. For Webster, *this* economy – understood with increasing clarity as an economy rooted in and shaped by the immanent being of the Triune God – is the only proper context in which Holy Scripture may be rightly apprehended.

D. A. Carson has faulted Webster for his allegedly *functional* ontology of Scripture, according to which Scripture is defined by "what it *does*."[21] Carson accepts that it is helpful to "connect Scripture to God himself," but does not wish to allow that the text "becomes" Holy Scripture on the basis of how it is used. Rather, God uses the Bible, because of what he has made it to be. Its function is derivative of its

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19. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 1-2.

20. Ibid., 2. Emphasis original.

21. See D. A. Carson, "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review (Includes Review of John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*)," *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006), repr. in Carson, *Collected Writings on Scripture*, 246. Emphasis original. There is an interesting apparent parallel here with postliberalism. George Lindbeck also argued that Scripture's ontology is determined by its use, although according to a very different paradigm: the "use" for Lindbeck is understood to be that of the community. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in A Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

nature, not the other way round. It is true that Webster can describe the ontology of Scripture in what appear to be functional terms, in both the earlier and later phases of the development of his doctrine of Scripture. For example, in an essay in *The Domain of the Word*, Webster cites with approbation T. F. Torrance's conviction that "[o]nly as we determine the function of Scripture [...] are we able to speak of its ontology."[22] In the introduction to that volume he states that Scripture's nature and use are to be considered "in terms of their occupancy and function in [...] the economy of grace and revelation."[23] He can also write that "the nature of Scripture is a function of its appointment as a herald of the self-communicative presence of the risen one."[24]

However, two lines of response might be marshalled in Webster's defence, against Carson's charge. First, as Michael Allen rightly observes, Webster understands the "function" of Scripture not primarily as its *human* use, but the *divine* use or purpose for Scripture in the economy (although this includes the corresponding, covenantal purpose that Scripture should be "used" by its recipients).[25] Second, and arguably more importantly, in Webster's developing paradigm the relationship between the function and being of Scripture cannot be reduced to one of simple functional priority, *because of the nature of the God-creature relation*. This point may be illustrated by means of a parallel with the

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22. Webster, *DoW*, 12.

23. Ibid., 4.

24. Ibid., 98.

25. Allen, "Toward Theological Theology," 225n. In itself, this point does not answer Carson's complaint, especially because Allen asserts, without demonstration, that Carson has "likely misread the word "function"" in Webster, in "identifying Scripture with its *human* use." (Emphasis added.) Carson does not explicitly say this: in fact, his argument focuses on divine rather than human use.

development of Webster's "moral ontology."[26] For the later Webster, in theological *anthropology* the principle *agere sequitur esse* comes to define – and indeed to prescribe – right moral action.[27] In the same way, in the later Webster's theological *bibliology* the principle *uti sequitur esse* may be seen to govern Scripture's use. For Webster, all created things are what they are in terms of their function in God's self-revelatory economy, and Scripture is no exception. Webster writes, "Scripture is what it is by virtue of its place in the divine economy over which the risen Christ presides and in which he reveals himself."[28] Certainly, God has a "use" for Scripture. But God's "use" of Scripture is a corollary of its place in God's economy: his external works which re-present his essential being in its turn to creatures. In the context of these works, God's "use" of Scripture is determined by the shape of the works themselves, which are the "given" *place* in which Scripture has its ontology. As Webster develops his account of the integrity of created nature in his latest work, this is expressed more unambiguously. In Webster's 2015 article, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," the main formal point is that the sequence of topics in a "balanced bibliology" is (logically and ontologically, if not always pedagogically) indispensable, and "place" comes first.[29] In another of Webster's last articles on the doctrine of Scripture, the point is given perhaps its clearest articulation. Following the logic of the collect for the second Sunday in Advent, Webster notes the "order of thought": "Scripture's proper use is determined by its purpose, *and its purpose is determined by its origin and nature*."[30] To describe Webster's ontology of Scripture

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26. The parallel is drawn by Webster himself in *DoW*, viii. Another expression of the same idea is found in ibid., 38.

27. See the introduction to Webster, *GWM*.

28. Webster, *DoW*, 32.

29. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 237.

30. Webster, "Holy Scripture," 176. Emphasis added.

as "functional" is thus potentially confusing. It is, from start to finish, a topologically and theologically determined, *dogmatic* ontology.

That is why the "place" of Holy Scripture in the divine economy or domain of the Word is, for Webster, "[t]he first and principal topic [of bibliology], from which all others derive and by which they are governed."[31] In the essay, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," Webster writes that a theology of Scripture "begins far back, in the doctrine of God."[32] This means that the true starting-point for the doctrine of Scripture is the inner divine life, as the foundation and fountain of the divine economy. As we have seen in the previous chapter, it is the concept of revelation that links the immanent Trinity with its economic re-presentation. God reveals himself. He is both subject and object of revelation, which is no less than his being in the reconciling act of his self-presentation, the external turn of his essence to creatures. Scripture is the divinely-appointed servant and instrument of *this* revelation.

Typically, Webster did not offer an account of the self-presentation of God apart from the covenant of grace. For the earlier Webster, this followed from his prioritisation of covenant over creation in determining both theology proper and theological anthropology. Despite Webster's "metaphysical" turn to Aquinas and the scholastics, this element of his theology remained. In one of his latest essays, Webster seems to come close to allowing the conceptual distinction between God's *revelation in creation* on the one hand, and his *revelation in the covenant* on the other. God, according to his goodness, "wills and brings into being the world of creatures," and in particular the "human creature," who is "endowed with a particular nature (rational, deliberate, moral) and directed to a particular end

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31. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 236.

32. Ibid., 238.

(intelligent fellowship with the creator)."[33] But human nature is not revelatory for Webster *qua* nature. Rather, it is teleologically oriented and defined. The nature of the human creature is "not so much a completed condition as a set of capacities whose exercise under God leads the creature to perfection."[34] This movement happens such that it is entirely dependent upon the divine works of providence, which are not "simply opaquely causal; they are at the same time acts of communication, intelligible acts, and by them the creature is led to knowledge of the ways of God and of its own nature."[35] Summarising the argument thus far, Webster writes, "God's creative and providential acts – his work of nature – establish and superintend a realm of benevolent divine instruction and creaturely acquisition of knowledge, in which the creature's intelligence, affections, and will are engaged by the one whose communicative presence is essential to the right use of creaturely powers."[36]

What exactly is Webster describing here? It is tempting, perhaps, to read this as an account of general revelation, according to which every human being has some knowledge of God by virtue of created things. However, it is very unlikely that general revelation is in view, as we shall see in chapter six. Or, interpreted according to a Thomist paradigm, Webster might be taken to offer here an account of natural man, who has his own – natural – *telos*, which may be attained independently of *Sacra Doctrina*. However, Webster's language here suggests rather a realm in which covenantal communication from God to humans (*ontologically*, communication of being, in the acts of creation and providence, and *epistemologically*, communication of knowledge, in some kind of act of "instruction") is a means of (human) moral

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33. Ibid., 239.

34. Ibid., 239-40.

35. Ibid., 240.

36. Ibid.

perfection or completion in relation to God, on the presumption of obedience. The created realm that Webster describes here patently does not reflect this present, fallen, world. It is prelapsarian. The communication from God in this realm may therefore properly be designated as what Geerhardus Vos calls "pre-redemptive special revelation."[37] Webster does not advert to the terminology of the "covenant of

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37. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 27-33. Webster himself distinguishes *theologia ante lapsum* ("before the defection of Adam"), *theologia viatorum*, and *theologia beatorum* in his 2009 essay, "Principles of Systematic Theology." See Webster, *DoW*, 139.

Richard Gaffin has a helpful footnote clarifying the role Vos gives to "pre-redemptive special revelation," and the implications of such a category for his (Vos') assertion that revelation is redemptive.

> Plainly a distinction exists [...] between the history of revelation, the actual revelation process, and the Bible as the (inspired, revelatory) record of that historical process. Scripture, whose own production is part of the history of revelation, is not a loose anthology of divine oracles. Inscripturation serves a specific and unified purpose which is best described in one word as *redemptive*. To be sure, the Bible tells us about God's work of creation, the original condition of man, and the historical fall, but it does not do so just to provide additional information or a broader orientation unrelated to its redemptive message. Its record of preredemptive states of affairs serves a specifically redemptive purpose—to provide the background and context for the work of redemption. Apart from a knowledge of God as creator, the original goodness of creation (including man), and the character of sin as disobedience rooted in Adam's fall, redemption is unintelligible. The Scriptures never equate God's work of creation with his work of redemption; they always safeguard the independence and priority of the former. On the other hand, the Bible always considers creation in the light of its (the Bible's) focus on the redemptive work of Christ. This involves no reduction (and certainly no dichotomy), because redemption is re-(new) creation, cosmic in its scope. In the light of these considerations the term "redemptive" is properly applied to the Bible, to biblical revelation in its entirety, without unduly narrowing its scope or restricting it as the self-revelation of God as creator and redeemer. Also, when the actual process of revelation is considered as a whole, the description of it, too, as redemptive need only be qualified with reference to its prefall beginnings. (Gaffin, "Introduction," xvi, n.)

Much of the content of this paragraph could be applied to the later Webster, especially the ideas that (i) the production of Scripture itself is "part of the history of revelation"; (ii) Scripture is redemptive in its purpose; (iii) creation has its own integrity. However, some of the concepts are understood in different ways from Vos. In particular, Webster does not develop the idea that creation has its own revelatory logic. Additionally, Webster would

works," "covenant of nature," or "creation covenant," but what he describes is materially similar to what the Reformed tradition means by such designations.[38]

Right at the end of his life, then, Webster seems to make room for some form of divine revelation that is: (1) not reconciliation (for no reconciliation is necessary in the prelapsarian state), and (2) not dependent on the mediation of Scripture, (or the prophetic/apostolic witness which, when written, constitutes the texts of Scripture). Presumably, some other kind of mediated revelation is implied, because for Webster, the need for revelation to be mediated is not merely a factor of man's noetic fallenness, but of the necessary ontological gap between the finite and the infinite.[39] Unfortunately, Webster does not develop these ideas. Despite acquiring the conceptual apparatus to open up a potential doctrine of general revelation, Webster resists that development, for reasons to be considered later.

In addition to the divine work of nature is the divine work of grace, a work made necessary by the "abandon[ment of] this realm of divine instruction" that is human sin: "not the realization of our nature but its repudiation, it can only issue in

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demur from using the language of "biblical revelation," except perhaps in a very tightly-focused definition of the adjective as instrumental. Revelation, for Webster, "*takes place through* [...] the text of Holy Scripture." (See Webster, *DoW*, 59. Emphasis added.)

38. For the "covenant of works" in classic Reformed theology, see, for example, the definitions from the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 7.

39. This is not to suggest that for the later Webster, man in his "natural" state is ontologically unfitted to receive divine revelation. Webster moves away from Barth's view at this point. In addition, natural man does not need a superadded ontological supplement to enable him to commune with God and reach his *telos* – as Aquinas suggested – but he does need a (covenantal) relation in which God sanctifies creaturely realities in order to communicate himself to creatures. Perhaps Webster might have developed some of these ideas in his proposed multi-volume systematic theology: sadly, we will never know. On Aquinas' teleological anthropology, see Daria Spezzano, *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification According to St Thomas Aquinas* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2015).

the ignorance that accompanies alienation from the life of God."[40] There is, for Webster, a transition from innocency to sin in humanity's condition, and this transition precipitates a new working of divine revelation.[41] Sin in fact "intensifies" the "workings of God's communicative goodness" as they now "take the social form of reconciling instruction."[42] Now, created nature needs not merely to be completed or perfected, but first to be reconciled and made holy. In this work, creatureliness is not "set aside" but "point[ed] to perfection."[43] The work is explicated in Trinitarian terms: the derivative mandate of the Father gives rise to the reconciling work of the Word, and the sanctifying work of the Spirit.[44] The Word is "the final teacher of creatures": the Spirit reiterates the Son's "definitive instruction."[45]

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40. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 240.

41. On the surface, this transition surely demands to be taken historically. If that is the correct interpretation, Webster further distinguishes his position from Barth's here. Webster is not, however, explicit on this point.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., 241.

44. Ibid., 240.

45. Ibid., 241.

Brad East has suggested that Webster's bibliology may be characterised by its Christocentricity. (See East, "The Church's Book," 135.) What East calls the "christological ontology" of the texts of Scripture is that which gives the texts their unity. As East puts it, the texts' "provenance, production, and purpose have Christ alone as their source, agent, and end." (Ibid., 138.) East's observation certainly makes good sense of the presentation in the Dogmatic Sketch, and the essays from the period covered by *The Domain of the Word*. In this period, Webster tends to speak of "the Word" as the agent who makes himself present, speaks, sanctifies etc. It is "the divine Word" himself who constitutes the sphere of "authority, effectiveness and promise" in which "the exalted Son takes into his service" the texts of Scripture. (See Webster, *DoW*, 8.) Again, in 2011, Webster wrote of Scripture as "an attestation of the rule of Christ," and "that to which Christ entrusts the task of instructing the church." (Webster, *GWM*, 1:191.)

However, it is a less appropriate assessment of Webster's doctrine of Scripture in his very latest essays. Indeed, in "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," Jesus Christ is hardly mentioned, except in citations from Scripture, or in the concluding collect, from the Book of Common Prayer. The same is true in respect of the late article, "Holy Scripture." Instead, the

This Triune work of postlapsarian revelation, by which "creaturely ignorance is overcome, and knowledge of God restored," has "creaturely form and extension."[46] The "instruction that issues from and accompanies reconciliation" comes with "instruments through which knowledge of God can be shared and conserved." As Webster explains, "[t]hese instruments are various: liturgical, sacramental, official, and scriptural."[47] It is here, and only here, as an instrument of reconciling instruction in the divine work of grace, iterated by the Word, and reiterated by the Spirit, that "Holy Scripture" finds its place.

4.2.2 Scripture's *Provenance*: Both Natural and Supernatural

Under this heading, which Webster calls the "causes" of Scripture, or the "ways in which the Holy Spirit acts as the mover of the human movements of writing,"[48] fall questions of the relationship between divine and human agency in the production of Scripture. Some of these questions will be treated in detail in the next chapter, which focuses on the relationship between the divine Word and the words of the Bible. By way of introduction to those issues, some general comments follow

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references in these pieces are to the divine more generally: to God's economy, and to the work of the Holy Spirit. Underlying all is the doctrine's "ground in a theology of God and God's revelatory will and work." (See Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 238.)

This change reflects the shift noted above (in chapter three) from Webster's earlier, Barth-influenced, solution to the problem of modernity by means of actualising his doctrine of God, to his later, more metaphysical, account of the God-world relation according to which creatureliness is situated within the economic purposes of God for his creation. This reinforces the formal point made above: Webster's doctrine of Scripture finds its place in a robustly Trinitarian dogmatics.

46. Ibid., 241.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 236.

here on Holy Scripture as an entity with both natural and supernatural provenance, or causes.

Central to John Webster's doctrine of Scripture is the idea that Scripture is both a natural, creaturely phenomenon, and at the same time, *something more than that*. By insisting on both aspects, and aiming at their dogmatic integration, Webster seeks to overcome the dualisms of modernity.[49] He argues that in modernity, Scripture, understood as a mere creaturely phenomenon, was "naturalised." According to modernity, the Bible is demonstrably a human book, the product of human agency at each stage of its inscripturation, redaction, canonisation, transmission, and so on. In this understanding, "[t]he biblical text is a set of human signs borne along on, and in turn shaping, social, religious and literary processes," and so "the enumeration of its natural properties comes increasingly to be not only a necessary but a sufficient description of the Bible and its reception."[50] In this assessment of modernity's Bible, Webster follows the important work of Michael Legaspi on the "death" of Holy Scripture.[51] Legaspi traces the changing place of the Bible in the academy from the age of the Renaissance and Reformation. In particular, he shows how the Bible became objectified as it was textualised: this "objectification" of Scripture becomes, for Webster, one of modernity's worst errors, to be avoided at all costs.[52]

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49. On Webster and modernity more generally, see chapter two above.

50. Webster, *DoW*, 5. Whereas, for Webster, the properties of the text are "*signa* mediating divine instruction." (Ibid.)

51. Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

52. Legaspi argues that, by the middle of the eighteenth century, "[i]nstead of looking *through* the Bible in order to understand *the truth about the world*, eighteenth-century scholars looked directly at the text, endeavoring to find new, ever more satisfactory frames of cultural and historical reference by which to understand *the meaning of the text*." (Ibid., 26.)

Within the modern paradigm (competitive dualism between the divine and the human) the Bible cannot be thought of as the product of divine agency, without compromising its true humanity.[53] The Bible is part of Kant's phenomenal world, and *only* of that world.[54] It is a *human* book, in this sense at least like every other book. It is open to rational investigation and historical criticism, again just like every other human book. It cannot be ascribed in any sense to God himself, nor can it be understood to bear divine "revelation" unless such "revelation" is in some way immanentised, grounded in human reason or feeling. The Bible depends upon, and can therefore offer us, no knowledge of the noumenal, because the noumenal is by definition unknowable. All this rests on what Webster calls the "dualistic framework of modern historical naturalism."[55] Any talk of "canon" or even "scripture"[56] within this paradigm, by presupposition "carr[ies] no metaphysical weight."[57]

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53. For Mark Allan Bowald, the problem with "[n]aturalistic accounts of Scripture and its interpretation" is that they "assum[e] that 'creaturely' is interchangeable with 'purely natural'." Such accounts "exclude from the beginning the actual conditions under which God's revelation makes itself present." See Bowald, *Rendering the Word*, 13.

54. Bowald traces the influence of the Kantian paradigm on biblical studies. He finds that "the limitation to strictly immanent spheres of agency and investigation became the status quo in the self-perception of the task of reading Scripture." (Ibid., 14.) In the academic disciplines of biblical studies, where talk of the action of God is countenanced at all, it is "only a result of the investigation," which is always primarily anthropological and immanent. Even conservative scholars "continued to accept the moratorium on antecedent judgments." (Ibid., 15.) Talk of God "tends towards description and yet the implications are disregarded" where such implications might threaten the rationalistic foundations of the modern hermeneutical project. Borrowing William Placher's phrase, Bowald summarises this as the "domestication of transcendence." See William Carl Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996). Cited in Bowald, *Rendering the Word*, 16.

55. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 20.

56. The non-capitalisation here is intentional.

57. Webster, *DoW*, 6.

Since any divine agency in the creaturely realm is seen by modernity as an aggressive competitor to creaturely agency, it can only be interpreted as a violation of the integrity of human communicative activity. This is emphatically a zero-sum game. If any such divine agency (communicative or otherwise) be allowed in respect of Scripture, then according to the modern paradigm, the Bible's "humanity" would no longer be real, only apparent. We would be left with a functionally docetic Bible, which might seem to be "human" but would be in fact the product of a divine "overwhelming" of the human. Such a Bible modernity cannot allow.[58]

A nominalist view of the relation between nature and God (which may have had its roots in pre-modernity, but which modernity accepted wholesale) gave rise to what Webster calls "semiotic separations."[59] By such separations, "scriptural signs no longer flow out from and participate in the reality signified, but are accidental, even arbitrary, representations."[60] On such a view, there is no real relation between the words of the Bible and the self-disclosure of God. In addition, on modern presuppositions, "doctrine" gets in the way of interpreting Scripture. Webster, drawing on Ricoeur, lays the blame for the retreat of a robust doctrine of Scripture from what he calls "the high theological culture of the Protestant West" at the feet of the twin forces of "deregionalization" (whereby all hermeneutics is subsumed into general theory) and "radicalization" (whereby the focus of hermeneutics shifted to the interpreting subject's modes of being in the world, or "spontaneous subjectivity").[61] The consequence of these forces, which are exemplified for Webster

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58. Ibid., 4, 12.

59. Ibid., 11. Interestingly, Webster insists that this is not just an intellectual problem, but a *spiritual* and *moral* one, with human sin at its root.

60. Ibid. On semiotic participation in the later Webster, see chapter six below.

61. Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology," in *W&C*, 53-55. We shall observe arguments like these made by John Barton below.

in Spinoza, is the notion that "theological doctrine is an impediment" to hermeneutics.[62]

To summarise, since Spinoza, historical naturalism has prevailed in biblical studies. Webster puts this down to "the complex legacy of dualism and naturalism in Western Christian theology, through which the sensible and intelligible realms, history and eternity, were thrust away from each other, and creaturely forms (language, action, institutions) denied any capacity to indicate the presence and activity of the transcendent God."[63] In respect of the Bible, this kind of dualism was strengthened both by naturalistic critics, but also – in Webster's view – by orthodox theologians.[64]

At this point, it is important to recall that Webster (at least in the period that gave rise to his *Dogmatic Sketch* and *The Domain of the Word*) thinks post-Reformation Protestant orthodox theology had its own material problem in respect of Scripture. This was different from, but at the same time, basically the mirror-image of, the problem of modernity. According to Webster, the Protestant orthodox assumed the same dualistic framework as the Enlightenment: in respect of Scripture they simply resolved the tension in the other/opposite way. They espoused "a strident supernaturalism" according to which the text was "almost entirely remov[ed] from the sphere of historical contingency."[65] Protestant orthodoxy thus effectively eliminated the creatureliness of the biblical text, and endowed it with alleged "divine properties." This amounted to a "divinising" of the text of Scripture by claiming ontological identity between revelation and the text of the Bible.

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62. Ibid., 56.

63. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 19-20.

64. As we have seen elsewhere, particular theologians are not named.

65. Ibid., 20.

For Webster, these are twin errors.[66] On the one hand, the Scylla of modernity tends towards an exclusively naturalistic view of Scripture: on the other hand, the Charybdis of Protestant orthodoxy tends towards an exclusively *super*naturalistic view. Webster believes each of these errors fatally seeks to cast asunder those things that God has conjoined, *viz.* the human and divine aspects of Scripture. In response – on the one hand – to the Protestant orthodox, Webster argues that revelation is by definition transcendent and mysterious: it cannot be domesticated into a human text, for this would be to identify God's supernatural activity (and even God himself) with human activity. So, Scripture remains merely human. This is the rationale behind Webster's repeated point (echoing Barth) that divine revelation cannot be thought of as being "to hand."[67]

In response – on the other hand – to modernity's "naturalisation" of Scripture, Webster insists that "[a]ffirmations about the natural history of the biblical text go wrong, not in claiming necessity for themselves, but in claiming sufficiency."[68] Again, there is *something more* to Scripture than its natural history: in Christian theology it is, after all, *Holy* Scripture. All instruments of the knowledge of God (to which Webster refers as "creaturely auxiliaries"[69]) are "taken up" for divine use within the revelatory and redemptive economy, in the redemptive missions of the Son and the Spirit. Scripture is, on this basis, holy. In articulating this "something more," Webster mounts a strident challenge to the modern dualism

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66. "Pure naturalism and pure supernaturalism are mirror images of each other." See ibid., 21.

67. See Webster, *DoW*, 4. Elsewhere Webster writes that "God is the personal subject of the act of revelation, and therefore revelation can in no way be commodified." (Webster, *Holiness*, 13.)

68. Webster, *DoW*, 40.

69. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 32.

which finds a competitive relation between divine and human agency.[70] "Divine revelation," he writes, "is not a unilateral cognitive force but a compound act in which the creator and reconciler takes creatures and their powers, acts and products into his service."[71] Here, and repeatedly, Webster either cites or alludes to Augustine: "God speaks from his human temple."[72] Once again we may note the point that, as a creaturely reality, Scripture must be understood in terms of its place in God's self-revelatory economy. There *is*, therefore, a real relationship between the words of the Bible and the revelation of God. Nominalism is rejected in favour of "the recovery of a participatory understanding of biblical semiotics," according to which Scripture "is understood to partake in the unfolding of the realities which it depicts."[73] The precise nature of the relation between the words of the Bible and revelation, or the speech of God and the human "temple" from which it proceeds, will be considered in the next chapter.

In the later phase of his bibliology, Webster turns to exegesis of 2 Peter 1:21 to articulate the dual "causality" of Scripture. God's *primary* acts in this regard are those of vocation, sanctification, and inspiration, which take the form of his calling of the prophets and apostles, his setting apart of those individuals to his service by means of the preparatory work in their lives that led them to the point where they could and would write Scripture, and the actual movement to write. Thus "God is Scripture's primary cause or author."[74] In the work of the authorship of Scripture,

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70. "[T]he impossibility [of relating the divine Word and the human words in a non-competitive way] is largely a misperception, generated by conventions of which we are able to become reflectively and critically conscious." See Webster, *DoW*, 11.

71. Ibid., ix.

72. Ibid., ix, 10, 14, 49. The reference is to the preface of Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

73. Webster, *DoW*, 12.

74. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 242.

however, human beings are also – secondarily – active, speaking agents even as they are "carried along" (φερόμενοι) by the Spirit: "the prophet or apostle is an instrumental or secondary author in the service of God the principal author."[75] This understanding of meaningful and "corresponding" activity on the part of God's human covenant-partners, moved by God, comports with the discussion of Webster's account of moral agency in the previous chapter. Again, more detailed discussion of sanctification and inspiration in Webster's bibliology follows in chapter five below.

4.2.3 Scripture's Properties: Dynamically Appropriated

The third material topic in Webster's bibliology is the *properties* of Scripture. In his article, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," Webster offers a (non-exhaustive) list of these: "veracity, sufficiency, perspicuity, efficacy, canonicity, and authority."[76] Unsurprisingly, Webster insists that any theological claims about such properties must depend on foundational dogmatic specification of the divine economy: "[a]s with all themes in bibliology, the domain of the [properties] of Scripture is the *magnalia dei*, the economy of God's reconciling and revelatory turn to the saints."[77] In other words, talk of Scripture's properties depends on what has already been established above in respect of Scripture's place and provenance.[78]

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75. Ibid., 244.

76. Ibid., 237. To this list might be added necessity. Webster tends to assert this property indirectly, such as when he argues that we are utterly dependent upon the light that is given to us by means of Holy Scripture.

77. Webster, *CG*, 39. In context, Webster is writing specifically about the "clarity" of Scripture. His statement has been generalised.

78. In his latest work Webster explicitly equates "properties" with "attributes." He writes of "the properties of Holy Scripture, that is, the attributes that it has by virtue of its place in the work of divine instruction and its origin in divine inspiration." In this section, therefore,

First, by way of definition, this section asks what Webster means when he talks about the "properties" of Scripture. A useful distinction may be drawn between "natural," "theological," and "divine" properties. Webster certainly acknowledges what he calls the "natural properties of the biblical texts."[79] By "natural" (or "historical") properties, he means those aspects of the biblical texts that are universally acknowledged to be open to enquiry, deriving from, for example, the processes of those texts' production and reception. Later, Webster makes it clear that even such natural properties cannot truly be apprehended without reference to God: "Scripture has its historical properties by virtue of its relation to the divine Word: its historical character is not *in se*."[80] Webster does not offer specific examples of such natural properties, but we might imagine that topics in biblical studies typically covered under "introduction" would be included. These include matters of date, author, recipients *etc.* In addition, textual properties arising from the work of tradition criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism would seem to be appropriately categorised here. Critically, however, "textual naturalism" is not enough: such properties must not be isolated from the texts' "spiritual history," and can never be reduced to "the *term* of inquiry" because "Scripture's human properties serve the announcement of divine judgment and consolation."[81] A necessary supplement to these "human" properties is thus an account of those properties that belong to Scripture by virtue of its particular place and provenance: we may refer to these as Scripture's "theological" or "supernatural" properties.[82] Crucially, however,

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"properties" and "attributes" are used without distinction. See Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 237.

79. Ibid., 247.

80. Webster, *GWM*, 1:60.

81. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 248. Emphasis added.

82. The language of "theological" properties of Scripture is from Webster, *DoW*, 41. Webster does not use the language of "supernatural" properties, and it is possible that he would

Webster is at pains to avoid the ascription of "divine" properties to Scripture. We can now see why Melanie Ross, in her book, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?* claims Webster's support for her argument against "a popular 'dropped from the sky' understanding of the Bible that comes dangerously close to textual deification."[83] Correctly, Ross argues that Webster opposes both the *deification* and the *reification* of Scripture.[84] She notes that Webster and the Benedictine liturgist Aidan Kavanagh are agreed on the point that "fundamentalism" arrogates to Scripture that which belongs only to God, namely his perfections or attributes.[85] As described above,

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disapprove of the term "supernatural" here, given his perennial desire to find a middle way between naturalism and supernaturalism in his bibliology. However, as long as the distinction between "supernatural" and "divine" properties is maintained, this language may be defended in the absence of a better term. It is most important to note that "supernatural" properties of Scripture do not displace or negate "natural" properties. Rather they are best understood as a dogmatic expression of the ways in which the natural properties of the texts come to serve the Word of God.

83. Melanie S. Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?: Defying A Dichotomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 17. In her book, Ross brings Webster into conversation with biblical-liturgical scholars Aidan Kavanagh, Louis Marie Chauvet (both Roman Catholics), and Gordon Lathrop (mainline, Lutheran). Page references to this book are from the online edition: the printed edition has different page numbers.

84. As Ross notes, by "reification" of Scripture Webster means what happens "when the inspired product is given priority over the [...] inspiring activities of the Triune God." (Ibid., 63.) For Webster, to reify Scripture represents "a failure to grasp that revelation is event, not manipulable object." See Webster, *DoW*, 96. The particular thought Webster is expressing here is Torrance's, but it comports with what Webster himself argues (following Torrance) elsewhere, such as in Webster, *W&C*, 28.

85. Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?* 61. Note that Webster did not typically use the term "fundamentalism" and was critical of its "undifferentiated" use by others. See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 19n.

Ross' book contains a number of mis-citations that make it hard to follow certain references. For example, n19 on page 61 is intended to substantiate the claim that "systematic theologian John Webster applauds Kavanagh's insistence that Christian worship is 'worship of the Utterer of the divine Word, but it is not worship of written Scripture.'" The footnote references Kavanagh's essay of 1983 (from which the quoted words are taken, although "Scripture" is not capitalised in the original) but nothing is said of Webster in the footnote. Indeed, there is no passage known to this author in which John Webster engages with Kavanagh directly. Ross might have indicated in the subjunctive mood that Webster *would*

Webster wants to acknowledge a divine and human *provenance* of Scripture (divine and human causation), but he does *not* want to acknowledge that Scripture has, or participates in, any divine *properties*.[86] The particular philosophical question of attribution (and whether or not divine attributes may be predicated of Scripture) is addressed in chapter five below.

For Webster, the classical Reformed properties of Scripture – clarity, unity, sufficiency, and authority – are not *ascribed* by human beings to the biblical text, so much as *acknowledged*.[87] Also, even as a property is thus attributed "passively," as it were, to the text of Scripture, so it must not be conceived without reference to divine action. In his work on Barth's early doctrine of Scripture, Webster highlights certain aspects of the Swiss theologian's approach that reveal marked similarities with his own later dogmatics. For Barth, Scripture "as *text*" is not to be understood as "the *principium* of Christianity": it is "normative [only] as a correlate of the divine freedom and majesty."[88] This is what explains Barth's insistence that such attributes as "sufficiency" or "clarity" are "not so much properties of the biblical text in and for itself; rather, they indicate 'God in his superiority, his majesty and freedom.'"[89]

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applaud Kavanagh on this point (as he doubtless would have), rather than giving her readers the impression that Webster had given his imprimatur to Kavanagh's specific argument.

By way of further example of referencing issues, the following note (n20) directs the reader to Webster's *Dogmatic Sketch*, 189 (a non-existent page!) when *Confessing God* is clearly intended. The subsequent note (n21) follows two citations from Webster: the first is not attributed at all—it is from *Confessing God*, 43—and the second has the wrong page number from the *Dogmatic Sketch* (22 for 23).

86. "[N]o divine nature or properties are to be predicated of Scripture." (Ibid., 23.) This statement is later qualified when Webster makes clear that what he is rejecting is the "unambiguous" ascription of divine properties to the text. See ibid., 28.

87. "[T]he logic of theological attribution is not ascription but acknowledgment." (Webster, *CG*, 38.) See also his comments on the acknowledgment of the authority of Scripture in Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 53.

88. Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology*, 48.

89. Ibid., 49. The citation is from Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*

When Webster himself comes to treat of the various attributes of Scripture, he frequently emphasises the point that no properties of Scripture are to be understood as merely inhering in the text. Rather, they must be interpreted in terms of the agency of God, and of the place of Scripture in the domain of the Word. For example, he argues that "[t]he clarity of Scripture is a matter for confession because it is not simply a linguistic or semantic property of the biblical text, perceptible *remoto deo*; clarity is that which Scripture acquires by virtue of the presence and action of God, and that which is seen as it makes itself visible to faith."[90] Scripture is *autopistos* and perspicuous, but these are not "formal or natural propert[ies] of the text considered in isolation."[91] Instead, the text *becomes autopistos* and perspicuous by the work of the Holy Spirit, "in the Spirit-governed encounter between the self-presenting saviour and the faithful reader."[92] The sanctified text of Scripture is clear, *to the extent that it is* "the field of the Spirit's working."[93] Likewise, the holiness of Scripture is *sanctitas aliena*: "a fruit of God's own *sanctitas positiva* in its external orientation."[94] Again, the normative status accorded to the canon must not be Scripture's own property. Rather, canon is "a consequence of its place in the divine economy."[95]

This positive articulation of the classical, Reformed properties of Scripture is developed in contradistinction to what Webster identifies as the errors of modernity.

(Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 56.

90. Webster, *CG*, 38.

91. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 93.

92. Ibid., 95.

93. Ibid., 101.

94. Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of the Canon," 31-33.

95. Ibid., 29. See also Webster's discussion of the unity of Scripture, along similar lines, in Webster, *DoW*, 40-41.

As Brad East has recognised, "when Webster talks about Scripture's attributes he does so polemically, or at least with a direct view to distinctly modern challenges to traditional claims in this area."[96] Webster's essay on the clarity of Holy Scripture is a case in point. In that essay, Webster seeks to counter both naturalist and supernaturalist approaches. In the former approach, the precedence afforded to literary hermeneutics denies the "hermeneutical viability of *claritas scripturae*." In the latter approach, clarity comes to be "expounded in terms of rational accessibility."[97] As always, Webster's "dogmatic account" is the prescribed antidote. He therefore insists that the clarity of Holy Scripture is not first-and-foremost an "attribute" of Scripture, as it is a "work of God."[98]

Later in the argument, Webster writes that "[t]he idiom of the ontology and properties of Scripture is dynamic."[99] This is an important statement of how Webster understands the relationship between the act of God on the one hand, and the text of Scripture and its efficacy in the economy on the other. First, "Scripture is clear as God is clear."[100] As an attribute of God, clarity makes no sense except in terms of event: it is always dynamic. The same is true of Holy Scripture. Clarity *is* a textual property, but it is to be recognised in terms of the *telos* for which the text exists. As Webster puts it, "[w]hat is required is [...] a dynamic (but not actualistic) ontology of Scripture which retains the idiom of properties and neither separates nor identifies clarity and efficacy."[101]

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96. East, "The Church's Book," 140n.

97. Webster, *CG*, 34-35.

98. Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture," 33.

99. Ibid., 49.

100. Ibid., 50.

101. Ibid., 51.

This is one point at which Webster's doctrine of Scripture may be distinguished from that of his mentor, Karl Barth. According to Barth's actualistic ontology, God's being is his act. Scripture, too, has its ontology in the divine act which "uses" it in revelation and reconciliation. Its clarity just *is* its efficacy. For Webster, this is going too far. To speak of properties of Scripture such as clarity in distinction from Scripture's given ends is not necessarily to "objectify" Scripture, so long as the context of revelation and reconciliation within which Scripture is – dynamically – "clear" is kept in theological view.[102] Clarity may be summarised, therefore, as "a property bestowed upon Holy Scripture by the work of the Spirit," as long as this pneumatic work is understood in dynamic terms.[103] Again, Webster can say that "[t]he property of 'apostolicity' is [...] ontologically foundational to Scripture," as long as this is unfolded "in the history of calling and sending in which the word of the apostles serves the Word of the living one as through the Spirit he instructs the church."[104]

Webster's critique of the Protestant scholastic view of the attributes of Scripture has been challenged by Tim Ward in his published doctoral thesis on the sufficiency of Scripture.[105] Ward outlines the "consensus of opinion" that in the two centuries after the Reformation, "what were taken to be Scripture's 'attributes' – typically perfection, sufficiency, perspicuity, and necessity – came to be grounded less in Christology and more in the fact of the divine inspiration of Scripture."[106] The

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102. Ibid.

103. Ibid., 52.

104. Webster, *GWM*, 1:59-60.

105. Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Ward's book was published before Webster's *Dogmatic Sketch*, but Ward is responding to Webster's earlier statement in Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology."

106. Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 54.

consequence of such an alleged development is that "[t]he attributes, understood as objective properties of the biblical texts, then become the ground of Scripture's authority, rather than its authority being located in the Christ to whom the text bears witness." Ward calls this position "biblicism." It is the location of the authority of the Bible in its form rather than its content.[107] In response, Ward mines the work of Robert Preus and Richard Muller in his defence of the post-Reformation orthodox theologians, with a particular focus on Francis Turretin. Ward's argument is that "whatever development there was [between the Reformation and seventeenth-century orthodoxy] did not represent a fundamental shift from a 'dynamic' to an 'objective' doctrine of Scripture."[108] He specifically refutes Webster's assertion that post-Reformation dogmatics "inadvertently prepared the way for 'non-theological construals of the Bible' by developing a theological epistemology that was insufficiently Trinitarian."[109] Although Webster engages with both Ward and Preus in the *Dogmatic Sketch*, he does not concede this particular point to Ward at this time. As has been noted above, Webster's evaluation of Protestant scholasticism shifted significantly in later years, and he came to accept the force of Ward's critique. The mainstream of Protestant orthodoxy, in both its Lutheran and Reformed refractions, demonstrably interpreted the attributes of Scripture in relation to divine agency.

It is important to recognise that for Webster, the attributes of Scripture require not just divine agency but in addition human receptivity. For example the "frame" for the confession of Scripture's clarity is the "reconciling and revelatory

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107. Ibid. This is the substance of Webster's argument in Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 55. There, Webster follows Edmund Schlink in referring to this as "formal supernaturalism."

108. Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 57n.

109. Ibid. The citation is from Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology," in *W&C*, 323-24.

presence of the Triune God."[110] In his later work, Webster insists that the properties of Scripture are to be discerned *in* the reading of Scripture, rather than in any way independently of that act.[111] Webster writes that "the sphere of the clarity of Holy Scripture is the church."[112] Indeed, clarity is "ecclesiologically realized."[113] The precise part to be played by the readers and receivers of Scripture in ecclesial context will be examined in the next section.

4.3 Scripture in the Hands of Men

This section continues the foregoing discussion of the material aspects of Webster's doctrine of Scripture. The focus here shifts from those aspects of Scripture that are – dogmatically – better conceived primarily in terms of *divine* acts, to those acts that may be appropriately understood as *human*, even granting primary divine causation throughout. This section therefore consists of a description of Webster's account of Scripture's purposes and its practical uses, in respect of the human hearers, readers, students, and preachers of Holy Scripture, in the location of the church. What follows depends on, and develops, the description of Webster's theological anthropology and ecclesiology set out in chapter three above.

For Webster, a full account of Holy Scripture is incomplete without giving place to the human creatures for the benefit of whom Scripture is given.[114] There is a

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110. Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture," 42.

111. Webster, *DoW*, 17-19. The reading of Scripture is treated below.

112. Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture," 52. Emphasis removed from an originally italicised subtitle.

113. Webster, *DoW*, 23.

114. This is reflected, for example, in his bipartite treatment of bibliology in the opening essay of *The Domain of the Word*. There, the two sections are "The origin of Scripture" and "The interpretation of Scripture."

"necessary second theme" in bibliology which is concerned with the missions of Word and Spirit through the Bible, in respect of "creaturely life and intellect."[115] In a balanced treatment, therefore, Scripture's divine origin is complemented by its "use by the church."[116] As Webster himself notes, this way of framing the doctrine has a long pedigree. Reformation theology "insist[ed] on determining the nature of Scripture *in usu et actione*."[117] However, as has been pointed out above, Webster insists on the strict material priority of *God's* relation to the texts. He is sharply critical of those approaches whereby Scripture's ontology comes to be defined by "community usage."[118] Webster's concern is therefore to ensure that "the element of creaturely reception [does not] become inflated": this objective he seeks to achieve by precise dogmatic specification, beginning as always with God in his inner plenitude.[119] As soon as the *salvific*, reconciling nature of God's revelatory presence to creation is acknowledged, however, Scripture's ontology can only fully be grasped by reference to its *telos* in its human recipients. There is, now, a "domain where reconciliation has not been perfectly appropriated or reached its creaturely term."[120] This dogmatically-defined and eschatologically-oriented domain is the one in which Scripture is instrumental to God's saving work. Webster cites Lutheran Robert Preus to this effect: Scripture "assumes its true significance only when viewed soteriologically."[121] This is the reason why Scripture's "nature and office" must be

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115. Ibid., 20.

116. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 5.

117. Ibid., 7.

118. See ibid., 6-8. Wilfred Cantwell Smith is the main culprit here, although the criticism extends more generally to the Yale school of narrative theology. Ingolf Dalferth is also faulted for an account in which "the corporate subjectivity of the church looms very large."

119. Ibid., 8.

120. Webster, *DoW*, 165.

121. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, 170. Cited in Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 43-44.

determined not only in terms of the doctrine of God and his revelation in the economy, but also in terms of the doctrine of the church.[122] We begin such a determination with an account of Scripture's purposes.

4.3.1 Scripture's *Purposes*: *Salus in Ecclesia*

For John Webster, the ends or purposes of Scripture are summarised as "the restoration and maintenance of rational fellowship between God and his human creatures in the common life of the community of the baptized, teaching, reproving, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the people of God may be perfected and enabled to effect their regenerate nature."[123]

This summary may be further distilled: Scripture's overarching purpose (singular) is to effect the salvation of creatures in, by, and through the church. For Webster, the church – like Holy Scripture itself – is the creation of the Word and the Spirit. It is part of the extension of the missions of God's two "Hands" in the economy of divine grace.[124] But unlike Scripture, which is given once and for all (*ephapax*)[125] and is destined to pass away in its instrumental functionality, the church is characterised by a more-and-more (*mallon*) realisation of its

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122. Ibid., 42. Webster continues to insist that such a shift of focus does not mean that the doctrine of God recedes from view: "All other Christian doctrines are applications or corollaries of the one doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity, in which the doctrine of the church, no less than the doctrine of revelation, has its proper home." See ibid., 43.

123. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 237. Webster draws, of course, on the language of 2 Tim 3:16.

124. Webster's ecclesiology was briefly treated in chapter three above, where it was suggested that for Webster, the church is the covenant of grace in its human manifestation.

125. This idea is connected to the *sufficiency* of Scripture for pilgrims *in via*. See Webster, *DoW*, 18.

eschatological nature, directed to glory.[126] The church is constituted humanly by its "definitive act," namely, its "faithful hearing of the gospel of salvation announced by the risen Christ in the Spirit's power through the service of Holy Scripture."[127] This definitive act is an ongoing one: it is the (repeated) event in which God addresses the readers or hearers of Holy Scripture.

The condition of the human reader of Scripture in the sphere of grace remains affected by sin, and to some extent is under divine judgment. This gives rise to the inattentiveness and "torpor" experienced by readers of the Bible.[128] But in spite of this Webster insists that the Word of God will do its proper work by means of Holy Scripture, because of the ongoing missions of the Word and the Spirit which guarantee that work's fulfilment, on the principle of divine grace, by ensuring that creatures actively embrace their own "proper work": faithful reception of the Word.[129]

For all that Scripture is the product of human and churchly (secondary) causes, Scripture thus stands in an important sense *above* the church, "serving the self-presence of God."[130] Scripture is authoritative in the church, not because the church "ascribes" authority to Scripture by means of some "politics of invention," but because of Scripture's place in the economy of grace.[131] At the same time, because the church is "the place where the saving presence of God is encountered,"

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126. Webster himself does not use these Greek terms. They are suggested here as a way of expressing the difference between two discernible sorts of interactions between divine and human agency in the economy.

127. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 44.

128. Webster, *DoW*, 20-21.

129. Ibid., 22.

130. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 48.

131. Ibid., 54-55. Thus, authority is "acknowledged" rather than "ascribed": this point has already been made in the section on properties above.

Scripture's authority cannot be "abstracted from the life and acts of the church."[132] Nor may Scripture's authority be "abstracted from its soteriological function."[133] Webster's account of canonisation finds its place at this point in his bibliology. Canonisation is interpreted as the church's act, but at every point it is to be understood in terms of Christology and pneumatology.[134] The church's proper act, in this and every other case, is to be one of hearing before speaking, an act of "*assent* rather than a self-derived judgment."[135] Obedient hearing of the divine Word mediated through the biblical witness is the church's primary and constitutive task. Such a view of course depends on a certain construal of the divine-human relation, whereby the divine initiative (or divine Word) takes precedence and the human response in covenantal obedience to that initiative is one that might be characterised as "active passivity."[136]

Webster's understanding of the relationship between church and Scripture – and the underlying view of the Creator-creature relation – has not gone unchallenged, even by those who are broadly sympathetic to his concerns. A helpful way to clarify and assess Webster's work at this point is therefore in conversation with one of his critics. In his monograph, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal*, Angus Paddison interacts directly and critically with John Webster's doctrine of Scripture.[137] In the opening chapter, Paddison expresses his "conviction that we still need to work at eliminating competitive understandings of divine and human agency

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132. Ibid., 55.

133. Ibid., 56.

134. Ibid., 59.

135. Ibid., 62.

136. Webster himself uses the term "active reception" in Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 237.

137. Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

in relation to Scripture."[138] In Paddison's view, Webster has ultimately failed in this regard. Paddison does welcome certain key aspects of Webster's proposal, particularly the "necessary emphasis on Scripture's location in God's action."[139] But, for Paddison, Webster gives insufficient attention to "the process of *receiving* Scripture and 'working it out'."[140] In other words, for Paddison Webster's emphasis falls too squarely on divine agency.

Paddison develops the alleged consequences of this imbalance.[141] In broad terms, Webster's account of Scripture's relationship to the church is "frustratingly disembodied and set at a distance from the church's dense, timeful practices."[142] This "disembodiment" comes about, first, because Webster "raise[s] the spectre of *episodic* accounts of Scripture's action on and among us."[143] The language of "episode," "event," and "incident" (which Paddison finds in Webster's lecture, "Texts: Scripture, Reading and the Rhetoric of Theology"[144]) runs the "risk of abstracting scriptural reading" from "the history we inhabit."[145] Episodic language, for Paddison, is "correlative with a punctiliar account of God's action on Christians."[146] Following Robert Jenson, Paddison insists that such language is to be

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138. Ibid., 32.

139. Ibid., 22.

140. Ibid.

141. Most of these relate to both Webster and P. T. Forsyth, with whom Paddison also interacts in this chapter. As Paddison has it, like Webster, Forsyth's account focuses on divine action.

142. Ibid., 20.

143. Ibid. Emphasis original.

144. Found in Webster, "Culture; Texts; Traditions." Similar language appears elsewhere. See, for example, Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 87.

145. Paddison, *Scripture*, 20.

146. Ibid., 21. Barth in particular has been criticised for his "overly punctiliar account of the Christian life" by George Hunsinger, as Paddison notes in ibid., 1n.

resisted, in order that Scripture's action may be "narrated," and understood in its "local" and time-bound setting.[147]

The second cause of "disembodiment" is located by Paddison in Webster's problematic ecclesiology. Borrowing the language of Nicholas Healy, Paddison terms Webster's doctrine of the church an example of "blueprint ecclesiology."[148] Such a model prioritises thinking over action, and theory over practice. In terms of the doctrine of Scripture, the result is that Webster "ends up imposing a 'blueprint' of Scripture's authority upon the church in abstraction from how the Spirit helps the church work out, see and imagine what Scripture is and the time of which it is part."[149]

Paddison's conclusion in respect of Webster's proposal is therefore that it is seriously deficient. Webster, in Paddison's view, ultimately fails to hold together divine and human agency in his account of Scripture. "One is left wondering," Paddison writes, "precisely what is left for human agency aside from receptivity."[150] According to Paddison, "[b]y hindering his readers from exploring how we *learn* to read Scripture through the time God gives us, Webster ends up not sufficiently protecting himself from the risks of a one-sided account of interpretation. In other words, Webster falls into the same trap he had earlier warned against, of pitting

147. Ibid., 21.

148. Ibid.

149. Ibid.

150. Ibid., 22. An example offered by Paddison is Webster's preference for the terminology of "reading" over that of "interpreting." For Paddison, this is illustrative of an alleged evisceration of the human act in respect of the text. Why, Paddison asks, cannot "interpretation [...] itself be sanctified by God, in the same manner that the human texts of the Bible are enlisted into the service of the gospel?" It is a fair point, and Webster does revert to the language of interpretation in some of his latest work, perhaps in response to Paddison's critique at this point.

human agency in competition with divine agency."[151] Before engaging directly with Paddison's criticisms, it is important to understand the latter's counter-proposal, as this sheds significant light on what Paddison interprets as the deficiencies in Webster's view.

Paddison's thesis is based on the contention that in a balanced doctrine of Scripture, we must give "attention to the church as a region where, as in Scripture's original constitution, divine and human agency meet in a transforming encounter."[152] Emphasis on divine action therefore "needs to be complemented by attention to the church but only because the church provides us with the resources to understand God's action."[153] Taking a step back, we should note that one "half" of Paddison's project sounds a lot like Webster's, and clearly reveals the latter's influence in both its language and material content.[154] Like Webster, Paddison insists that "Scripture is a text constituted by divine action."[155] It is certainly "not a text explicable wholly by reference to human agency."[156] Indeed, Paddison reserves specific criticism for "those approaches [to the doctrine of Scripture] which bracket out divine agency."[157] Webster is – along with others taking a similar approach – therefore commended for "a welcome move [...] to afford divine agency a decisive

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151. Ibid.

152. Ibid.

153. Ibid.

154. For example, on the very first page of his book, Paddison can talk of Scripture as having its being in "its commissioned role in the saving purposes of God." See ibid., 1. This language sounds much like Webster's.

155. Ibid., 5.

156. Ibid.

157. Ibid., 6.

role in our understanding both of what Scripture is and our role as readers of *this* text."[158]

Despite this positive assessment, however, Paddison believes that his own proposal succeeds where Webster and others have allegedly failed, namely in holding together divine and human agency rather than construing divine action and a focus on the church as "competitive."[159] Paddison expresses the relationship in this way: "Attentive to Scripture's immersion in both divine action and the church's practices, we can therefore say that the latter helps render visible the text's providential location in God's purposes, for the church is privileged to participate in God's actions."[160]

> But there is – for Paddison – an important caveat to this approach:
>
> We should not suppose [...] that locating Scripture in the action of God and the life of the church marks a two-stage attempt to place Scripture in a wholly divine region of activity (the gospel) and then a wholly human region of activity (the church). This chapter is not an attempt to offer a doctrine of Scripture 'from above' and then a doctrine 'from below'. Indeed, such a competitive account would only trade on asymmetrical impulses that I shall criticize. It is necessary to remember that the church, as a people brought into being by God, is a region of divine activity continuous with the eccentric action of the gospel. When we move to the community of the reconciled, we are paying not less attention to the reconciling divine action which generates Scripture. [...] Attempts to locate Scripture theologically do not need therefore to balance out overused categories 'from above' and 'from below'. Rather, locating Scripture theologically is a matter of seeing the interwoven aspects of Scripture's vertical and horizontal locations.[161]

How does Paddison seek to "see" (and describe) these "interwoven aspects"? His two original contributions in this regard relate to his use of the related concepts

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158. Ibid., 7.

159. Ibid.

160. Ibid., 7-8.

161. Ibid., 8-9.

of "leavening" and time. First, Paddison argues that the churchly action of "worship and practice *leavens* this text [of Scripture] through the people of God."[162] The choice of the metaphor of "leavening" is significant because leavening is, by definition, a time-dependent *process*. As a transitive verb, to "leaven" has the figurative meaning of "to pervade, causing a gradual change, especially with some moderating or enlivening influence."[163] What is remarkable about Paddison's use of the term is that Scripture is evidently the *object* rather than the *subject* of the verb. To suggest that Scripture effects change on the worship and practice of the church might be uncontroversial; to argue that churchly agency effects change *on* Scripture demands more explanation.

Clearly, Paddison does not mean that the text of Scripture *qua* text, is in some way changed. Rather, his argument is that the *agency* of Scripture is both mediated and, in some, time-bound fashion, determined by acts of the ecclesial community. Paddison expresses this by the language of "more and more." In an intentional adjustment to Webster's "episodic" account, Paddison says that "Scripture is not just 'again and again' taken up into God's eccentric action and expelled into the church, but also 'more and more' taken into God's reconciling action.[164] The image of "leavening" is organic: Scripture ferments and stews in the bakehouse (or brewery!) that is the community of God, undergoing a process independent of which it cannot fully be accounted for.

Paddison also makes significant use of the related concept of time. He writes that the people of God "are trained to see Scripture's location in time."[165] Like John

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162. Ibid., 5. Emphasis added.

163. See https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/leaven. Accessed 23 April 2018.

164. Ibid.

165. Ibid.

Webster, Paddison wants to "locate" Scripture. But whereas Webster's preference is for topological, "dogmatic" location, Paddison prefers to plot Scripture's position on a time axis. He argues that "in episodic accounts of God's relationship to Scripture, the text is not sufficiently set within our time."[166] The remedy, he claims, is along the following lines: "*Co-ordinating the life of Scripture with the life of the church invites us to locate Scripture in its proper liturgical setting, a setting which reworks what we imagine time to be.*"[167] Reading Scripture must of necessity be a *local* activity, any account of which must be "inseparable from accounts of the church."[168] Again, this position is a direct challenge to Webster. For Webster, ecclesially-focused doctrines of reading Scripture tend towards poetics and even self-assertion: "too much space is given to the interpreting agent, too little space to the self-presentation of God in the economy of *grace.*"[169] Paddison, in response, argues that we need to develop what he calls a "concursive imagination." The approach fostered by such an imagination need not lose sight of "its proper self-forgetfulness, its chastened horror at its own idolatries, its reference to the work of Word and Spirit."[170] Rather, "aware that participation in the life of the church is an exercise in formation, [it] sees Scripture as God would have us see it and need not be, as John Webster would charge, an exercise in self-assertion or creativity."[171]

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166. Ibid., 21.

167. Ibid. Emphasis original.

168. Ibid.

169. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 97. Emphasis original.

170. Ibid.

171. Paddison, *Scripture*, 22-23. Another writer whose proposals echo Paddison's in certain ways is Roman Catholic liturgist Aidan Kavanagh. Most of Kavanagh's work was done before Webster, and he did not engage Webster directly, although he has been brought into discussion with Webster by Melanie Ross in her book, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?* Kavanagh goes even further than Paddison in his assertion that "scripture and liturgical worship are correlative functions of that fundamental entity, the human assembly," because

Paddison's exemplar in following this approach is Stanley Hauerwas, for whom, according to Paddison, church and Scripture are "intertwined, implicated within one another and mutually informing."[172] Developing this approach – which we might call "perichoretic" – Paddison invokes the notion of "liturgical time."[173] Time is, according to Paddison "first received." It is our worship, within which the reading of Scripture takes place, that is "an occasion for re-imagining our participation in time."[174] Such re-imagining includes the related convictions that "God is an agent within time and that time is not devoid of his promise," and that time is "eschatologically directed" and "apocalyptic." This amounts to a strong affirmation that the process of reading is itself formative, but not in respect of readers who are formed, but of Scripture itself: "The church's liturgical repetition of Scripture is not a returning again and again to the same 'meaning' but rather a deepening or a chastening encounter with the triune God who providentially orders the texts of Scripture."[175]

Paddison thus advocates a "figural" reading (and preaching) of Scripture, according to which Scripture is interpreted as having a pattern and story whereby "events at different times" are understood according to "their participation in a

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"scripture is the oral and written account of the assembly's historic faith experience." See Aidan Kavanagh, "Scripture and Worship in Synagogue and Church," in *Backgrounds for the Bible*, eds. Michael Patrick O'Connor and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 78. It is just such a construal of the relationship between church and Scripture that Webster would characterise as what Ross calls "pneumatologically thin." See Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?* 62. For Webster, "[t]he church [...] is natural history only because it is spiritual history, history by the Spirit's grace." See Webster, *CG*, 181.

172. Paddison, *Scripture*, 23. By placing Hauerwas in the "postliberal strain within theology which sees the church as an indispensable companion to understanding Scripture," Paddison clearly identifies his own sympathies.

173. Ibid., 24.

174. Ibid., 25.

175. Ibid., 26.

common history."[176] This unity of events includes not only those events described by Scripture as *past*, but the present-day experiences of the people of God.[177] Scripture is therefore a "figurally charged text."[178] Crucially, for Paddison, Scripture does not merely act to mediate salvation, but "*is itself* a participant in the drama of salvation."[179] As a "participant," Scripture itself has an *eschaton* to which it reaches; Scripture itself is "elected to participate in a quite specific field of divine activity to which human action must correspond."[180] Truth itself is "free to be eschatological rather than 'archaeological'."[181] In conclusion, "[t]ime, far from signalling an alienation from the scriptures, is the opportunity given by God that we might faithfully step into the narrative, participate in it, and extend it."[182]

Paddison expands on his claims in his second chapter, arguing that Scripture's role in ethical formation can only be understood in churchly context.[183] He rejects the working assumption of biblical scholar Tom Deidun (which Paddison identifies as representative of biblical scholarship generally) that "we can talk of Scripture as 'some-thing' capable of being understood in isolation from attention to

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176. Ibid., 28. This is of course heavily dependent on Hans Frei's proposal. See Mike Higton, "Hans Frei," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

177. Paddison, *Scripture*, 28-29.

178. Ibid., 28.

179. Ibid. There are echoes of the work of von Balthasar in such a formulation. See W. Tom Dickens, "Hans Urs Von Balthasar," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture*, 8.
Note also that Webster himself uses some similar language when he writes that "Holy Scripture is an element in the drama of God's redeeming and communicative self-giving." See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 42.

180. Paddison, *Scripture*, 28.

181. Ibid., 30.

182. Ibid., 31.

183. Ibid., 33.

the lively reality of Christ and the community in whose life it is embedded."[184] Ethics, Paddison insists, *requires* context. Just so, "[t]heological ethics [...] like theological hermeneutics [is] a distinctly local enterprise."[185]

This is the reason why, in Paddison's terms, Christians do not "use" Scripture.[186] Rather, "Christian moral action makes sense [...] when situated within a wider range of *narratable* divine-human activity."[187] Christian engagement with Scripture is thus better expressed by the language of *participation* than by that of *use*.[188] Scripture, by this account, is "that which shapes the church and is embedded in a region of divine-human activity *through the church's life*."[189] To return to Paddison's favoured "time" axis, Scripture is "a text profitably embedded within the length of our lives."[190] Again, "Scripture is not something we can use, and so isolate, apart from its relationship to Christ and to its location within the church. The text as *Scripture* is 'caught up', webbed, within this particular, non-negotiable life and setting."[191] Drawing heavily on the example of John Howard Yoder, Paddison argues that Christian ethics always begins "midstream,"[192] and emerges from within the life of the community. Truth is formed in and through time, and is eschatologically verified.[193] The virtue that is most necessary for the church as it reads Scripture is

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184. Ibid., 35. Emphasis removed.

185. Ibid., 36.

186. Ibid., 38.

187. Ibid., 39.

188. Ibid.

189. Ibid., 41-42. Emphasis added.

190. Ibid., 43.

191. Ibid., 45. Emphasis removed.

192. Ibid.

193. There is some overlap here with the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. In the words of von

therefore patience.[194] The most "basic question" for the church as it reads is "What is God *doing* with Scripture?"[195]

How may Paddison's critique of Webster (and his counter-proposal) be evaluated? It must be pointed out that the centre of Paddison's concern is with Scripture *here-and-now*, as it is an element (or "participant") in divine and churchly agency *in the present*. This is an eminently *practical* concern. Such an observation is not to ignore Paddison's stress on a chronological location for Scripture, which (in the broadest terms) extends in its frame of reference *back* to the definitive events which it records, and *forward* to the eschaton, and which (in more specific terms) displays or reveals its truth over the course of human lifetimes. Nevertheless, Paddison's focus is on acts of reading and preaching and ethical formation which take place in the present experience of the church. He is relatively unconcerned with questions of how the Bible text came to be, and how it came to be transmitted to us. He has comparatively little to say doctrinally about inspiration,[196] sanctification (in Webster's sense, to be explicated below) or the doctrine of revelation. It is thus unsurprising that Paddison's focus is on the practices of reading and preaching, and

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Balthasar's interpreter W. T. Dickens, von Balthasar believed that "theologians err when they suppose they can extract the essentials of faith's object from the scriptures as though they were juicing an orange." See Dickens, "Hans Urs Von Balthasar," 206.

194. Paddison, *Scripture*, 57.

195. Ibid., 59. Emphasis added. Appeal to the work of the Holy Spirit means that, for Paddison as for Yoder, "attention to the church does not degenerate into optimistic appeals for human sociality." See ibid., 63.

196. Paddison appears uncomfortable with a doctrine of verbal inspiration, although he does not specifically say that this is his view. He seems to lend his support to P. T. Forsyth's view of biblical inspiration, according to which the property of inspiredness is attributed to the apostles rather than to the biblical writings. Thus, in contrast to Webster's ontology of Scripture *per se*, Forsyth "offers what might be called an ontology of the apostles, a theological account of who they are and how their writings are to be understood, both of these accounts firmly in relation to the saving action of God." See Angus Paddison, "The Authority of Scripture and the Triune God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 4 (2011), 11.

that ecclesiology comes to the fore in these discussions. His criticisms of Webster need to be read with this point in mind, lest Paddison be thought to be engaging Webster at every point in his doctrine of Scripture.

Having established this point, it needs next to be noticed that Webster and Paddison to a large extent share similar concerns. We have already noted Paddison's appreciation for Webster's "necessary emphasis" on accounting for divine action in a doctrine of Scripture. In addition, both theologians want to secure a place for human response to the divine initiative revealed in Scripture. Granted, the way that they do this is at points quite different, but it hardly seems fair to Webster to make the general criticism, as Paddison does, that Webster gives insufficient attention to "the process of *receiving* Scripture and 'working it out'," when the *Dogmatic Sketch* contains extensive discussions of the relationship between Scripture and the church, the act of reading in the economy of grace, and the place of Scripture in the church's theological reasoning.[197]

Nevertheless, it remains to address Paddison's specific criticisms. In respect of Webster's alleged "frustratingly disembodied" doctrine of Scripture, what may be said in response to Paddison's claim that Webster's account is "episodic"? First, this criticism is based in part on particular terminology that Webster uses in a lecture given in 1998: the words used are "episode," "event," and "incident." The language is there, for sure, but it is highly doubtful whether its use here constitutes an "episodic" account of what happens when the Bible is read. In the same sentence in which he uses the word "episode," for example, Webster makes it clear that he is speaking of "part of the *process* whereby God arrests our ignorance of his ways and savingly communicates with us."[198] In other words, "episodes" of reading the Bible are not,

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197. Paddison, *Scripture*, 22. See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 42-135.

198. Webster, "Culture; Texts; Traditions," 11. Emphasis added.

for Webster, to be extracted or abstracted from what is an ongoing sequence of divine (and human) activity. When Webster refers to Scripture-reading as an "event," it is "an event in *this* history" which is none other than "the struggle of sin and redemption which *embraces all human history and action*."[199] This is hardly "episodic"! Once again, while Webster can describe reading the Bible in "incidental" terms, it is always "an incident in the baptismal *process* of mortification and vivification, of overthrow and re-establishment; anything less would not match up to the eschatological character of Christian reading."[200] In context, it is clear that Webster's allegedly "episodic" language is detached from neither extended process nor eschatological goal. What, then, does it signify? Perhaps the best way of accounting for Webster's use of such terminology as "episode," "event," and "incident" is that it is simply a recognition that Christians do not read the Bible *all the time*. Growth and change in the Christian life (mortification and vivification) are certainly a process, but the process is neither constant nor even, although it should ideally be ongoing and purposive.

Aside from the use of a particular vocabulary, then, is there any other basis for the criticism that Webster's doctrine of Scripture is couched in a "punctiliar" account of God's action on believers? Punctiliarism has often been identified in Barth, although one recent commentator suggests that questioning of the Swiss theologian at this point has now been "settled" in his favour.[201] If such criticism could not stick on Barth, the mid-career Webster might similarly be exonerated: his

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199. Ibid., 13. Emphasis added. Webster can write of the church as "primarily spiritual event, and only secondarily visible natural history." See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 47. The intention behind such language is clearly not punctiliar.

200. Webster, "Culture; Texts; Traditions," 14.

201. Gerald McKenny, "Freed by God for God: Human Agency in Karl Barth's *Evangelical Theology* and Other Late Writings," in *Karl Barth and the Making of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 122.

resolute defence of Barth's moral ontology led him to follow the Basel theologian closely in his own constructive work in this area. Even so, perhaps Webster retained an awareness of the force of such criticisms, and his focused attention on virtues in a number of his late essays may be seen to illustrate a shift in response.[202]

Second, Paddison's charge of "disembodiment" relates to Webster's alleged "blueprint eschatology." Webster himself responded to this charge in his 2011 article, "In the society of God," where he engages directly, not with Paddison, but with Nicholas Healy.[203] Webster admits in that essay that his approach to ecclesiology "seems doomed to fall into idealism, since its core proposal is that the being of the church is not identical *simpliciter* with a human historical project, a social-material reality in time."[204] Webster cites Healy as his critic in this regard.[205] In response, first Webster accepts the "threat of a failed connection between a dogmatic account of the church and the empirical realities of its history."[206] Nevertheless, Webster will not "rest content with abstractions of this kind."[207] His reply to Healy involves a questioning of what he takes to be Healy's deep-level "conviction, part metaphysical and part theological, and often only half-articulated,

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202. See many of the essays in the two volumes of Webster, *GWM*.

203. Webster, ""In the Society of God": Some Principles of Ecclesiology," repr. in *GWM*, 1:177-94.

204. Ibid., 1:178.

205. Interestingly, Webster also references Healy's subsequent "significant correction" to his earlier thesis, in which Healy recognises the need for "setting ecclesiology within a more developed doctrine of the economic Trinity, one in which the action of the Holy Spirit is accounted for in a way that does not bind it to the church's practices." See Nicholas M. Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (2003), 302.

206. Webster, *GWM*, 1:178.

207. Ibid.

that the real is the social-historical."[208] Ecclesiology's "proximate *res*" (the church as a distinct form of human society) undergoes a "metamorphosis" into its "principal *res*" ("the temporal processions of God and the eternal processions from which they are suspended").[209]

A dispute about what is "real" enables Webster to turn the tables on Healy and those like him who propose socially-based and practice-centred ecclesiologies: "What presents itself as a principle of non-competition between divine and social agents turns out to require us to fold language about divine action into language about the functions and codes of Christian society."[210] Webster is firm in his rejection of such moves, ultimately because the being of creatures is always and at all times utterly dependent on God. That is why "ecclesiology and ecclesial action are creaturely realities, to be set under the metaphysics of grace."[211]

Thus Webster would surely defend his doctrine of Scripture against Paddison's charges by going on the offensive. Where Paddison claims that Webster fails to *hold together* divine and human agency in his account of Scripture, Webster might well reply that Paddison has failed to *distinguish* them, and has thereby "folded" divine agency into human agency.

Paddison's preferred metaphor of "leavening" is not one with which Webster would have been comfortable, given the implication that Scripture only fully comes to be (or matures) in ecclesial context. Webster would see this as equating to the unacceptable suggestion that Scripture's ontology is not "fixed" until human action in some way establishes it. It is true, as we have seen, that Scripture cannot be fully

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208. Ibid.

209. Ibid.

210. Ibid., 1:178-79.

211. Ibid., 1:180.

accounted for, in Webster's view, without appreciation of the role of its human recipients and the fulfilment of their (and Scripture's) *telos* in the community of the regenerate which is the church. But, for Webster, Scripture's ontology is never conferred upon it by the church, or indeed by any other human agent.[212] Scripture must stand *above* the church, "properly segregated, discontinuous, intrusive in the busy processes of ecclesial invention."[213]

For Paddison, on the other hand, truth itself is in some way dependent on the community that receives and interprets it. Again, Paddison's perichoretic approach to the relationship between church and Scripture fails properly to distinguish between the divine act of revelation and the creaturely realities that receive and reflect that act. Paddison's reluctance to speak of Christian "use" of Scripture is a more promising move, but he fails to account for divine "use" of Scripture, which is Webster's terminology of choice. Finally, where Paddison argues that the most

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212. Thus in a late essay, Webster writes an important paragraph that might well be taken as a reply to Paddison's critique. It is worth citing at length:

> [W]e should not suggest that the Word and church are parties in a revelatory process in which the church 'completes' or 'activates' the Word, bestowing on it an effectiveness which it would not otherwise possess. Against this, we must simply affirm that the Word's employment of creaturely attendants denotes no incapacity in [*sic.*] the part of the Word and no inherent capacity on the part of the creature. Quite the opposite: use of servants is a *potency* and an operation of grace. God elevates but does not stand in need of the church's ministerial acts. The Word *elects* ecclesial form. On the other hand, we may not rest content with a negative conception of the church as simply an empty vessel for the Word, a kind of inert social arena for the Word's sole causality. Though to speak in this way undoubtedly catches something of the sheerly intrusive, critical and creative power of the Word, if pressed too hard it can overlook the fact that this power operates in communities in time – in the Israel of the prophets and the church of the apostles. Only because in limitless freedom the Word establishes itself in these histories is it operative to convert and regenerate. The Word elects *ecclesial form*.

See Webster, *DoW*, 23-24. Emphasis original.

213. Webster, "Purity and Plenitude." The specific critique here is of a Roman Catholic ecclesiology, but the quotation has wider import.

"basic question" for the church as it reads the Bible is "What is God *doing* with Scripture?" (in which acts we must participate), Webster would surely insist that the prior question is "What is God *saying* with Scripture?" (to which words we must obediently respond).

4.3.2 Scripture's *Practical Uses*: *Receptio et Communicatio Verbi Deo*

For John Webster, Scripture's uses are closely related to its purposes. Webster describes the uses of Scripture as "the attitudes, habits, skills, and practices that characterize active reception of Scripture in the life of the church, and that enable the communication of the goods of divine instruction."[214] Such talk of "active reception" and "communication" gestures in the direction of three groups of people who have a particular relation to Scripture: (1) Scripture's readers or hearers;[215] (2) theologians; and (3) preachers.[216] In this final section of this chapter, these three groups will be considered in turn.

(1) Readers and Hearers. Webster's interest in readers and the act of reading was not a new one when he came to articulate his doctrine of Scripture. As we have seen in chapter one of this thesis, from his time in Toronto in the 1980s Webster became committed (largely under the influence of George Schner) to the

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214. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 237.

215. Webster does not usually make any significant distinction between the two related acts of reception that are reading and hearing or listening. But in one interesting paragraph he claims that listening is the fundamental church practice, because the assembly is "*made to hear*." Beyond this, the church's "acts of reading, construing and interpreting, have value only insofar as they are modes of attention." See Webster, *DoW*, 45. Emphasis original.

216. Obviously, these categories are porous. The theologian is first a hearer/reader of Scripture. But not every hearer/reader is a theologian or preacher, in the sense that Webster develops these ideas. Once again, note that the focus here is on *ecclesial* reception of Scripture ("in the life of the church") rather than reception in the academy *per se*.

close reading of theological – and biblical – texts, as part of a process of intellectual *ressourcement* and spiritual growth. In his bibliology, however, Webster is careful not to classify Bible-reading as just one more, undifferentiated, species of the human activity of reading. This is because of the particular, theological ontology of the Bible described above. As Sarisky correctly observes, Webster thinks that "readers need to know *what sort of text the Bible is* in order to see how to interpret it."[217] We have seen that this means locating the text in the wider theological context that relates it to God and his self-revelation to creatures: the "domain of the Word."

In addition, Webster is concerned to locate readers themselves in the same domain. Webster thus consistently locates the *hearer* and *reader* of Scripture in the church.[218] Here he explicitly leans on Barth.[219] For Barth, as Webster observes, the address of God which comes to the reader through the text of Scripture (in this particular case, the Gospel of John) is that address which, in the free sovereignty of God, "is constitutive of [...] both the text and the reader's situation."[220] The reader therefore stands under the text, because she is under the commanding voice of God. John's Gospel "has its place in a domain which precedes and encloses the reader and from which the reader cannot extract himself without making it impossible to read the text fittingly. This is the domain of baptism, church and canon."[221] The act of faithful reading is thus above all a human act of correspondence to the divine self-

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217. Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 1. Emphasis added.

218. In a memorable phrase, Webster writes that Christ "makes [the church] into the audience of revelation." See Webster, *DoW*, 44.

219. The influence of Barth on Webster at this point is also traced by Sarisky, in respect of both "structural parallels" (ontology precedes ethical imperatives) and "specific substantive parallels" (Jesus is the eloquent sovereign, whose communication is *effective*: "Christ's work [...] includes within itself its own subjective realization"). See Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 4-5.

220. Webster, "Barth's Lectures on John," 72.

221. Ibid., 73.

disclosure, that takes place "within the domain of God's self-explication."[222] Again, following Barth, "[t]hrough baptism, the Christian reader *has been* placed in the sphere of church and canon; far from guaranteeing freedom from prejudice, to extract oneself from that sphere undermines interpretative objectivity."[223] Such a view of the reader of Scripture under the sign of baptism includes a rejection of modernity's understanding of the self as "free" to the extent that it thinks for itself and makes its own meaning. It is for this reason that Webster prefers to speak of "reading" rather than "interpretation,"[224] and why he finds much lacking in the common use of critical methods in the reading of Scripture.[225] There is a further critique here, of postmodern accounts of reading, according to which readers and reading communities themselves constitute textual meaning. Webster is clear: "Whatever else it may wish to say, Christian theology will surely be troubled by any account of the reader's intentions which gives such significance to reading decisions that reading the text becomes rewriting it."[226]

In the first stage of the development of his bibliology Webster articulated a proposal for a "re-regionalized" biblical hermeneutics, a hermeneutical ontology that is theologically determined by metaphysical fundamentals.[227] Above all, this

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222. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 93.

223. Webster, "Barth's Lectures on John," 73. The language of "sphere" is Barth's. Barth writes of "this life of ours under the sign of baptism and therefore in the sphere of the church of Christ." He says that "only in the sphere denoted by the terms church, sacrament, and canon can John's Gospel be read and understood as the word of an apostle, i.e., as the word of a witness not to himself, but to the revelation imparted and entrusted to him." See Karl Barth, *Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John 1. Lectures At Münster in 1925 and At Bonn in 1933* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 5, 8.

224. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 86. Later on, however, Webster would revert to the language of interpretation. See Webster, *DoW*, 19-31.

225. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 103-05.

226. *Webster, W&C, 81.*

227. Ibid., 57. Later, Webster refers to a "hermeneutical anthropology, a theological definition

proposal is grounded in the conviction that, "Christian reading and interpreting of the Bible is an instance of itself": it is, in other words, "*sui generis*."[228] Noting the limitations of Lindbeck's and Frei's postliberal construals of the hermeneutical situation, Webster proceeds to offer his own proposal, which is grounded in the act of God: "the hermeneutical situation is [...] an episode in the history of God's relation to humanity in his works of creation, salvation and perfection."[229] As partakers in restored humanity, Christian readers and interpreters of Holy Scripture act as God's covenant-partners. Mortified and vivified, they (passively) "are clarified" by the light of Scripture.[230] But, as in Webster's other accounts of human moral ontology, readers of the Bible do have an active part to play. "Revelation is a movement which moves" and the Christian is "actively caught up" in that movement of God which brings about its creaturely counterpart in response.[231] Webster thus suggests that in his account of the reader, his doctrine of Holy Scripture comes full circle. Indeed, drawing on de Senarclens, he writes of the "circuit of the Spirit" which "embraces God's revelatory and inspiring acts and God's illuminating work, so that we do indeed have 'a world of revelation, where God and man are associated again in mutual understanding'."[232] Yet one particular reading of Scripture is never to be equated *simpliciter* with the Word of God. Webster is insistent that we must not fuse

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of what is involved in being an interpretative agent summoned into Christ's presence by his prophetic and apostolic witnesses." (Webster, *DoW*, 46.) The discussion in *DoW*, 45-49, is similar at many points to that of Webster's earlier essay on hermeneutics.

228. Webster, *W&C*, 58.

229. Ibid., 64.

230. Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture," 64. As Sarisky notes, the notion of illumination is "[a] theological concept companionable to mortification and vivification." See Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 9.

231. Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture," 66.

232. Ibid., 63. The citations are from Jacques de Senarclens, *Heirs of the Reformation* (London: SCM, 1963), 282.

"Word of God" into "reading," so that Jesus is "assimilated to any single contingent representation."[233] To avoid this error, the church is compelled to engage in "reading the Bible against [the church's] self."[234]

This is the rationale for Webster's hesitancy to adopt Matthew Levering's idiom of "participation" in respect of biblical exegesis.[235] For Levering, the exegete in the church represents the continuation of the teaching office of Christ. The Church participates in the mediation of the gospel to such an extent that, Webster contends, the reception of the Word is confused with the divine Word itself. For sure, these are not to be completely separated, but they must be rightly distinguished, if the reader of Scripture is to avoid the conceit of having captured the Word, and if the Word is to remain free to break down the reader as well as to build him up.[236]

Later in the development of his bibliology, in line with his turn towards Aquinas and the scholastics, Webster employs a further set of concepts. Invoking the category of "subjective revelation in its reconciling and regenerative effectiveness," Webster writes of how the Holy Spirit "set[s] in motion" certain "created powers and activities."[237] These "powers and activities" are given in creation, and ordered (or redemptively reordered) to eschatological perfection or fulfilment. Webster categorises these as (1) disciplinary and (2) spiritual in nature. *Disciplinary* activities, or means, are exegetical practices. Such practices do not entail the outright rejection of historical criticism, but cannot be subsumed under, or

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233. Webster, "Reading Theology," 60.

234. Ibid.

235. Webster, *DoW*, 14n. Levering's proposal is outlined in Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

236. Webster, *DoW*, 24-25.

237. Ibid., 62.

encompassed by, such criticism. Indeed, Webster suggests four caveats to the use of the skills of historical criticism in the domain of the Word. First, Scripture must not be treated as a purely natural entity. Second, such skills must be used above all to hear the instruction of the Spirit. Third, interpreters must not exercise "destructive curiosity." Fourth, these skills must be employed in the right context, which is the church.[238] *Spiritual* activities or means are those habits which form godly readers, including prayer, readiness, obedience, and "a holy dissatisfaction which presses ahead to knowledge."[239] Each of these "powers and abilities" may be understood as aspects of the "use" of Scripture in the community of the saints, although in differentiated ways. These activities are applied by readers in the act of reading Holy Scripture, but they are in turn nurtured and judged (mortified and vivified) by the same Word that Scripture serves. This gives rise to a "virtuous circle" of virtue ethics appropriate to the reader of Holy Scripture who is herself being conformed to that holiness that is commensurate with her baptism into Christ, even as she fulfils her created (and re-created) identity in response to her vocation.

Such are the implications of Webster's contention that to become good readers of Scripture, "we must become certain kinds of persons."[240] This means that we must be converted, rather than merely that we must develop our natural

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238. Ibid., 63. Darren Sarisky contends that Webster does not do enough to develop his statements about how exegetical practices relate to the historical-critical reading of Scripture. For Sarisky, this threatens to compromise Webster's attempt to overcome the dualism between the historical, immanent features of the text and the transcendent. This criticism will be explored in more detail in chapter six below. See Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 12.

239. Webster, *DoW*, 63.

240. Ibid., 26. This is the counterpart (or flipside) to the Thomist (and derivatively Websterian) maxim *agere sequitur esse*, and it is justification for speaking of a "virtuous circle." Compare Bavinck's prescription for the dogmatician: "[I]t is imperative that a person be a good person, that he or she stand in a true relationship to God, whom to know is eternal life." See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:92.

capacities, although such conversion is the gracious perfection of nature rather than its destruction. First and foremost, we must read with *faith*, acknowledging our location in the economy of divine grace, and our place in line with the prophets, apostles, and teachers who have preceded us.[241] Ultimately, readers of Scripture must be accounted for in terms of theological anthropology, along the lines depicted in chapter three above. As such readers, moved by the Spirit towards the given ends of created and recreated life, come to read Scripture *well*, God gives them understanding, the focus of mind to meditate on his works, and the will and desire to submit to his teachings. This is the perfection of their nature, or "reason itself about its appointed task."[242]

(2) Theologians. As suggested above, for Webster the "theologian" is first and foremost another churchly reader of the Bible, in the same situation as every other believer who receives Scripture in the domain of the Word, under the sign of baptism. But Webster, in line with the Reformed tradition, also recognises the ecclesial *office* of theologian, one set apart to exemplify "redeemed intellectual judgment."[243] By way of a response to modernity, Webster offers "a thumbnail sketch of the office of theology."[244] For Webster, human reason in general is "a sphere of *God's* activity."[245] Theology is a particular "operation of reason in the economy of grace."[246] It is important, according to Webster, that we recognise that theology cannot "transcend" or "inspect from the outside."[247] Reason is never autonomous or

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241. Webster, *DoW*, 27.

242. Ibid., 28.

243. Ibid., 123.

244. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 122.

245. Ibid., 127. Emphasis added.

246. Ibid., 123.

247. Ibid., 124.

sovereign. Rather, the practice of reason in the economy of grace is "indicative" of "the presence and activity of the Word – that is, theology is awed testimony to the critical and consoling presence of God in the Spirit's power, set before the church in Holy Scripture."[248] The pairing of "critical" and "consoling" is an example of that two-sided divine activity which Webster expresses elsewhere as "devastation" and "renewal," and "judgement" and "the giving of life."[249] Elsewhere this pair is presented as God's work of "mortification" and "vivification."[250]

Theology's office is, above all, *churchly*, albeit many professional theologians may have a location in the (more-or-less secular) academy.[251] Following Ursinus, Webster writes that theology is "more a process of moral and spiritual training and an exercise in the promotion of the common life than it is a scholarly discipline."[252] It is a "pastoral" office in the community of the baptised.[253] And it "guides [...] by exemplifying submission to Holy Scripture as the *viva vox Dei*."[254] Because of the divine promise, Webster is optimistic about the future of "properly doxological" evangelical theology.[255] Such theology will give due priority to exegesis, and to "the task of theological interpretation, that is, reading Scripture as divine address."[256]

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248. Ibid., 126.

249. Ibid., 134.

250. See, for example, the essay: Webster, "Mortification and Vivification."

251. Like Webster himself, of course, although as described in chapter one, only Webster's final academic posts (at Aberdeen and St Andrews) were entirely non-ecclesiastical in nature.

252. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 116.

253. Ibid., 128.

254. Ibid.

255. John Webster, "Jesus Christ," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, eds. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60.

256. Ibid., 61.

These remarks are further evidence of Webster's broad alignment with other proponents of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) movement, as described in chapter one. Above all, theology has Holy Scripture as its centre. Dogmatics is not "a set of improvements upon Scripture" but is better understood as a modest and transparent "kind of gloss on Scripture."[257] This means that the genre of theological writing should be "transparent" to Scripture.[258] Webster is, as we have seen elsewhere, well aware that his manifesto places him at the margins of mainstream theological work in the academy. He is alive to the "scandalous" nature of his proposal, and the "embarrassment and censure" which it attracts.[259] But, he ends with an encouragement to like-minded theologians to stand firm, with the resources for "survival" of fellowship under the Word and prayer.[260] It is not difficult to see how Webster's own experiences described in chapter one shaped his understanding of the theological task and the various challenges attached to its contemporary context.

How, then, might Webster's approach to "theological" hermeneutics be specified? The most important point is that TIS is to be shaped by Scripture's dogmatic ontology. TIS is (or should be) "a way of reading which is informed by a theologically derived set of interpretative goals, which are governed by a conception of *what the Bible is*."[261] By way of a sharp critique of this view of the theologian's position and task in respect of Scripture we might consider the work of Webster's

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257. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 130.

258. Ibid., 133.

259. Ibid., 134-35.

260. Ibid., 135.

261. Webster, *DoW*, 30. Emphasis added. See also the discussion about the fundamentals of TIS in ibid., 32.

Oxford colleague John Barton.[262] In his monograph, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*,[263] Barton argues the thesis that "biblical criticism comes down to attention to the *plain meaning* of the biblical text."[264] Barton's work may be read as an attempt to undercut and even subvert critiques of critical biblical study such as those advanced by Webster.

First, to sum up Barton's view: "[a] critical approach asks first, What kind of text is this?"[265] Interestingly, this is similar to the question that John Webster considers when he asks "what the text is," but it is important to note that Webster's concern is with the *theological ontology* of the text rather than its genre.[266] For Barton, a truly critical approach is characterised by its "bracketing out" of the question of the truth of the biblical texts, and treating them like any other texts.

Second, Barton rejects the narrative (commonly accepted by both proponents and opponents of biblical criticism) that critical approaches to the Bible derived from the Enlightenment, with significant early trends set in motion by the

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262. Barton, an Old Testament scholar, was already an established figure on the Oxford theological scene by the time Webster was appointed to a professorship in 1998. Barton had in fact been at Oxford almost continuously since his undergraduate days in the late 1960s. He was made Oriel and Laing Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in 1991, a post which he held until 2014. Personal email correspondence with Professor Barton confirms that he and John Webster had frequent discussions during Webster's tenure of the Lady Margaret Professorship from 1996-2003, and indeed taught some classes together. Barton does not mention Webster by name in his published work. It is, however, quite natural that he would not want to engage with a close colleague in print, given the sharp nature of the disagreement between their respective positions. Webster, on the other hand, does engage briefly with Barton in Webster, *W&C*, 66-67.
Barton's page at Campion Hall in Oxford contains his biographical details: accessed 14 June 2018, http://campion.imageworks-testing.co.uk/user/6.

263. Barton, *Biblical Criticism*.

264. Ibid., 3. Emphasis added.

265. Ibid., 24.

266. See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 19.

Reformation.[267] Instead, Barton argues, the roots of biblical criticism may be traced back to the ancient world, even if the Enlightenment "perhaps did release critical awareness to an extent that had not been in evidence earlier."[268]

Third, Barton turns the tables on the advocates of TIS, arguing that "the neutral, bracketing-out approach proper to biblical criticism [this is his description of his own method] not only is essential, but actually expresses *more* respect for the text than does a so-called theological hermeneutic."[269] Barton asserts that,

> Biblical criticism requires the reader not to foreclose the question of the truth of the text before reading it, but to attend to its semantic possibilities before (logically before, not necessarily temporally before) asking whether what it asserts is or is not true. Attempts to collapse the reading of texts into a single process, as in some proposals to undertake a (postcritical) "theological reading" of the text and in certain "committed" or "advocacy" approaches, are misconceived.[270]

As will be clear from the citation above, Barton distinguishes two different approaches which "foreclose the question of [...] truth," and press the "need for a theological hermeneutic."[271] Such approaches are attributed to "a powerful lobby" which urges the need for "a more theological style of biblical study, starting from an overtly confessional position and acknowledging that these books are the church's Scriptures, not a playground for scholars."[272] The second of these approaches ("advocacy" interpretation) is of less relevance to John Webster, and will not be discussed in detail here.[273] The first approach, on the other hand, ("reclaiming the

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267. Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 118.

268. Ibid., 130-32.

269. Ibid., 27. Emphasis added.

270. Ibid., 6.

271. Ibid., 141.

272. Ibid.

273. See ibid., 150-51. By "advocacy" interpretation, Barton means those approaches that

Bible for the church") is close to Webster's. It derives from "the alleged hostility of biblical criticism to the Bible as a book of faith."[274] The problem with biblical criticism, according to this view, is that it treats the Bible in the same way as any other piece of literature. This has led to a "problem" or "crisis" because the Bible has come to be perceived as irrelevant to Christian faith and life. "The solution to the crisis," in Barton's words, reflecting the "reclaimers" programme, "lies with a willing return to seeing the Bible as the church's book and reading it by a deliberately theological hermeneutic."[275]

Barton's genealogy of such proposals begins with Karl Barth, who, Barton demonstrates, urged the reading of Scripture "how it wishes to be read."[276] Barton reads this as a call to exegete the text of Scripture in its canonical form. This attention to the received phenomenon of the text, as opposed to some putative reconstruction of what may have stood behind the text, led Barth to encourage a "turn from fragments to the interpretation of the whole."[277] The most important

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come from a liberationist or feminist perspective, which argue that the project of biblical criticism is biased towards first-world male scholars.

274. Ibid., 142.

275. Ibid., 143.

276. Cited in ibid., 149.

277. Ibid. Barton later shows that the postcritical call for a "second naiveté" in respect of the Bible is also rooted in Barth:

> The first naiveté in biblical study is a simple, precritical acceptance of what is in the Bible as "gospel truth." [...] Biblical criticism puts an end to that naiveté. But Barth argued powerfully that there was a need, after criticism, to become naive again, in the sense of recapturing the openness and wonder in the presence of the text that had characterized precritical reading. (Ibid., 157.)

Barth himself called this "an examined, critical naiveté." (Cited in ibid., 158.) Paul Ricoeur takes up the idea of second naiveté, but in a way that is much more amenable to Barton's project. For Ricoeur, [t]he true, second naiveté is available only to those who have passed through the "desert of criticism," and it is not a matter of simply reverting to a precritical naiveté. It depends on a critical interpretation of the text." See ibid., 183.

recent proponent of such a proposal, under Barth's influence, was Brevard Childs. Childs is well known for his proposal of a "canonical approach" to biblical interpretation. According to Barton, "Childs's case may be summed up by saying that biblical interpreters need to adopt a theological hermeneutic in reading Scripture."[278] Childs's programme was inherited and worked out in the writings of scholars like Gerald Sheppard, Christopher Seitz, Walter Moberly, and Francis Watson.[279] Apart from Barth, all of these examples Barton gives are scholars working primarily in biblical studies. That is because Barton wants to focus on the discussion within the discipline. He does, however, recognise the voices of "those calling for the Bible to be given back to the church, who are mostly working in areas of theology other than biblical studies and who are impatient with the critics' apparent inability or unwillingness to free the Bible to speak in places where real theology is done."[280] Of the various categories of TIS proponents Barton puts forward, John Webster is closest to this one. However, we should note that Webster's primary concern is not that the Bible should be "given back to the church," but that it should be "given back," in the first instance, to God.

Barton's response to these proposals is to go on the offensive. He argues that the "bracketing out [of questions of theological truth] is methodologically essential" because "[o]ne cannot establish what the Bible means if one insists on reading it as necessarily conforming to what one already believes to be true – which is what a theological reading amounts to."[281] It is debatable whether this is an entirely fair

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278. Ibid., 145.

279. Ibid. Barton ackowledges that Watson "operates at considerably more distance from Childs." Indeed, Watson's is "a somewhat more complex line of thinking," which focuses on God's "communicative intentions" and actions in and through the biblical text.

280. See Ibid., 152.

281. Ibid., 164.

representation of theological interpretation's starting-point. Certainly, John Webster's emphasis on Scripture as "as much a de-stabilising feature of the life of the church as it is a factor of its cohesion and community" suggests that the Bible should never lose its capacity to "break open" and "break down."[282]

Still, Barton argues that proponents of "moving beyond" criticism are "most prone to read their own theological systems into" the Bible,[283] and he offers Childs as an example, whose theological system looks like it "could come from a Reformed textbook on Christian doctrine."[284] But Barton's observation hardly proves his thesis: his assertion that "there is an element of "reading in" at work" begs the question, because it assumes that the Bible and Reformed systematics do not in fact coincide to the extent that they do in Childs's work. Nevertheless, Barton's response is to argue for a "far less" theological approach.[285] He suggests, subversively, that critical biblical scholarship has in fact been "*too* theological":[286] "I do think it is much more likely that the field [of biblical studies] is skewed by religious commitment than by hostility or indifference to religion."[287] This is indeed a curious conclusion, not least because Webster, for his part, saw himself as a theological *outsider* rather than as representing any sort of mainstream in academic theology. Do Barton's remarks here indicate a turning of a tide within the academy? Perhaps more likely is that Webster and Barton are at opposing poles in a discussion where many of their colleagues in the guild espouse some sort of mediating position.

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282. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 46.

283. Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 165.

284. Ibid., 166.

285. Ibid., 167.

286. Ibid., 169. Emphasis original.

287. Ibid., 171.

In contrast to proponents of a theological hermeneutic who "insulat[e]" Scripture, making it "ultimately vacuous," bracketing out theological questions is the best way truly to honour the Bible.[288] It is possible, Barton thinks, to be postcritical without being non-critical. (Ricoeur is his example.) But, Barton also observes that postcritical approaches tend towards being noncritical, "and this is to be resisted."[289] He concludes: "Biblical criticism as I conceive it is a rich and profound way of taking the Bible seriously, which ordinary Christians ought not to be kept in ignorance of."[290]

For Barton, it is unacceptable to approach Bible-reading with prior convictions about the text, particularly the conviction that "anything that is in the Bible must be true." Barton believes that such an *a priori* judgment "blocks the normal way of reading a text," according to which the acts of discerning meaning and assessing truth are distinct.[291] This is a problematic suggestion, however, which may be countered by appeal to the "normal way" we read texts of differing provenances. When receiving a letter, for example, one often makes *a priori* judgments about the contents, depending on the knowledge of the author. When a letter in a mis-spelled envelope arrives from an unknown sender overseas, the contents of which indicate that the recipient has been specially selected to receive a large sum of money, the recipient is (rightly) predisposed to read the letter with considerable scepticism as to its truth-claims. On the other hand, when a letter arrives from a spouse or close friend, for example, the recipient is (rightly) pre-disposed to believe what that letter says, before even reading it. Of course, any *a priori* judgments in such cases might be wrong: one might really be the recipient of a

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288. Ibid., 172.

289. Ibid., 189.

290. Ibid., 190.

291. Ibid., 172.

large fortune, or one's spouse may be telling lies (or it may turn out that the hand-writing is a forgery). The actual process of reading *may* therefore (at least in theory) cause the recipient to revise or even overturn an *a priori* judgment. Even after the process of reading is complete, the recipient may still possibly be mistaken about the truth claims of the letter. But there is clearly nothing wrong or "abnormal" about having an *a priori* attitude towards the truthfulness or otherwise of a text that we may read.

For this reason, Barton's comparison of biblical criticism with musical analysis is inappropriate. He is right that "[w]onder [in respect of a symphony] cannot have the effect of making the analyst expect to find – and therefore actually to find 3/4 [time signature] if the movement is in fact in 4/4."[292] There is indeed a conceptual distinction between appreciation and analysis. But a time signature of 3/4 (say) is not an integral part of a symphony movement. Let us say, however, that someone is moved to wonder by a piece of music that she is told is a classical symphony: she would be quite right to expect to find a work in four movements, with the first in sonata form. This expectation derives from a right understanding of genre.

A conversation between Barton and Webster about these issues was never carried on in print, but in this way we may trace the contours of how the issues may have been framed. Webster has not often been engaged by those far to his "left" on the theological spectrum, and so the introduction of Barton at this point serves as a useful foil to enable Webster's own articulation of the theologian's office to stand out. Debates over the rights and wrongs of TIS in both biblical studies and systematic theology will doubtless continue, and cannot be resolved here. But this discussion has illuminated how Webster positioned himself in respect of TIS, and it

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292. See ibid., 174.

illustrates his hope that more fruitful work in this area might be done by both dogmaticians and specialists in biblical studies: for John Webster, the two disciplines should be much closer than they are often allowed to be.

(3) Preachers. Webster was, of course, himself a regular preacher, particularly during his Oxford days.[293] His commitment to the church included a commitment to preaching as a churchly activity. However, Webster never wrote anything substantial on homiletics, or anything approaching a fully-worked theology of preaching.[294] He only began to turn his attention directly to preaching and preachers late in his career. In *The Domain of the Word*, preaching is taken up as an example of the means by which the Word communicates its benefits by means of Holy Scripture.[295] Preaching is a means by which the Holy Spirit forms the church. It is closely connected to reading and theology, because it "both arises within and returns to contemplative attention to the Word; the church preaches because it is a reading and hearing community." But preaching is distinct from reading and hearing (and from the theological task) in that it is a public *iteration*, albeit a *re*-iteration, of the divine Word. Webster states that "God's administration of the gospel includes public speech as a mode of the Word's reconciling presence." Preaching, or promulgation of the gospel, is a "second" action, which "institutes the means for the public declaration of the first [divine action, *i.e.* of reconciliation]." However, following the rule that God is always the primary agent, "what happens in the proclamation of the gospel is that through human proclamation *God makes his*

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293. See the collection of his sermons: Webster, *The Grace of Truth*, repr. as Webster, *Confronted by Grace*.

294. The relation of Scripture and preaching is specifically excluded from his *Dogmatic Sketch*. See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 1.

295. The following paragraphs follow the argument in Webster, *DoW*, 25-26.

appeal."[296] This is not a "joint venture" between God and man, but rather "God himself completes his own work by entrusting it to creaturely ministers."

Building on this foundation, Webster aims to articulate the preacher's task. Negatively, he rejects a "correlationist" understanding of preaching. According to the correlationist view, it is the *preacher* who must establish the connection or continuity between the divine Word and the contemporary context. The problem with this position is that it supposes a fundamental discontinuity between the world of the Bible (or the divine economy that it describes) and the present-day world. Instead, Webster positively insists that this work of connection is already (preveniently) accomplished, because "in acting as an ambassador of the Word, the preacher enters a situation which already lies within the economy of reconciliation, in which the Word is antecedently present and active."[297]

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has offered a critical reading of the five main "topics" of bibliology, as identified and expounded by John Webster. Throughout, it has been apparent how Webster's understanding of the Creator-creature relation shapes his doctrine of Scripture. Scripture's *place* is defined theologically, as the sphere or domain that is constituted in its Godward aspect by divine revelation, and its humanward aspect as the church – the social manifestation of the covenant of grace. Scripture's *provenance* is expressed in the unfashionable idiom of causality, with an insistence throughout on both the primary causality of the eloquent God and the secondary, complementary, causality of the human agents who wrote, redacted,

296. Emphasis original.

297. Ibid., 26.

copied, preserved, and translated the texts of the Bible. Scripture's *properties* are accounted for in dynamic terms, ensuring that Scripture is neither deified nor reified, but received as the sanctified witness to the Word of God. Once more, the relationship between God and his creatures comes to the fore in the active and ongoing mission of the Spirit in respect of the biblical texts, bestowing properties that must be interpreted with reference to both the God who bestows, and the ecclesially-located reader who receives. Invocation of Scripture's readers signals a segue into discussion of Scripture's *purposes*, defined by Webster in terms of bringing about a creaturely *telos* of salvation in the church. Here Webster has come under fire from critics like Angus Paddison for his alleged over-priority of divine agency at the expense of human, churchly agency. A defence of Webster's account of Scripture's purposes in the church was proposed, suggesting that some at least of Paddison's criticism is unwarranted. Finally, Scripture's *practical uses* were discussed in relation to the human "users" of Scripture – its readers/hearers, theologians, and preachers. Webster was brought into conversation with critical biblical scholar John Barton, for whom Webster's entire paradigm of the God-creature relation and Scripture's dogmatic ontology must be jettisoned in order to study the Bible correctly. The next chapter of this thesis takes a more in-depth, critical approach to an issue that undergirds all of the above material aspects of John Webster's bibliology, namely, the precise nature of the relationship between the Word of God and the words of the Bible.

§ 5. The Divine Word and Human Words

5.1 Introduction: *Mystery and Mediacy*

We have seen in the previous chapter John Webster's argument that to move beyond modernity's dual errors of naturalism and supernaturalism, we must reject "a competitive understanding of the transcendent and the historical," and work out in its place "a thoroughly theological ontology of the biblical texts."[1] This involves situating Scripture in the context of the temporal/historical divine missions to creatures, which missions are themselves grounded in the eternal divine processions. The eternal God – and in particular, the risen Lord Jesus Christ – is eloquent: he speaks to his creatures.[2] Holy Scripture is instrumental to that speech. As Brad East pithily expresses Webster's thought, "through Scripture God the Word speaks the word of God."[3] Given this foundation, perhaps the central critical question in respect of John Webster's bibliology is: *What is the relationship between the divine Word and the human words of Scripture?* Or, to put it in Webster's own words, what is the relationship between "God's revelatory presence (*i.e.* the self-manifestation of God in his outward turn to creatures) and the biblical writings"?[4] This question is the principal concern of the present chapter.

Two key preliminaries frame John Webster's answer. First, the relationship between the Word and the words is specified as one of *mystery*. The question of *how* human speech and text can proceed from God is mysterious, "first, because it cannot be grasped within the metaphysics of historicism or pure nature (according to which there can be no human speaking ἀπὸ θεοῦ); and, second, because describing this

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1. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 21.

2. Webster, *DoW*, 35.

3. East, "The Church's Book," 126.

4. Webster, *DoW*, 9.

human communicative movement requires talk of God's free self-movement."[5] There is thus a necessary degree of humility and reticence to be observed in forming any answer to this question. Webster writes that, "[i]t is tempting to search for a master concept or pattern which will generate a comprehensive account of how prophetic and apostolic writings are a form of the divine Word."[6] The mysterious character of the relation implies that this temptation is one to be resisted. Even so, Webster is far from believing that the theologian must fall entirely silent in the face of mystery! There remains much that may, and must, be said, and not all of this by way of the *via negativa*.

Second, this relationship is one of *mediacy*: "Theology cannot resolve scriptural mediacy into revelatory immediacy; and it must not simply bear with it or kick against the goads, but learn to profit from it as that which God has designed."[7] Webster comes close, at least in some of his more rhetorical language, to overcoming this supposedly irreducible mediacy, but he maintains it nevertheless.[8] It has already been suggested in this thesis that it is axiomatic for Webster that revelation is

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5. Ibid. Reformed theologians have often invoked the category of mystery at the point of articulating (even the possibility of) the communication of the infinite God to finite creatures. Memorably, Bavinck opens the second volume of his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* on the doctrine of God with the maxim: "Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics." See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 29. In his 1899 review of Bavinck's volume, Vos offered a more literal translation: "Mystery is the life-element [*levenselement*] of Dogmatics." See Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos,* 2nd ed. (1980; repr., Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2001), 486.

6. Webster, *DoW*, 12.

7. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 38.

8. For example, as East notes, the closest Webster comes to (apparently) eliding the distinction between revelation proper and the biblical text is when he describes the Word of God as "revelation in its presence as Holy Scripture." See Webster, *DoW*, 139; East, "The Church's Book," 135n. Yet at all times Webster is careful to specify the proper relationship between the two as one of mediacy.

immediate, considered absolutely, because of its relationship to the divine essence. But, equally, given its creaturely term, revelation is always mediat*ed*, when considered under its relational aspect. This formula reads at first blush like a paradox, but the contention here is that it best expresses Webster's concerns.[9]

For all that the relationship between revelation and the words of the Bible is one of mediacy, Webster insists that it is not one of mere contingency.[10] The *particular* words of Scripture are impelled by revelation. Revelation is mediated by *these* words, and they are not replaceable or interchangeable with other words. Webster thus consistently expresses his agreement with the three elements of the classical, orthodox, theory of inspiration: *impulsum scribendi*, *suggestio rerum*, and *suggestio verborum*.[11] Inspiration applies to the very words of Scripture (it is "verbal"), and indeed to *all* those words (it is "plenary"). The words of the prophets and apostles are thus "a creaturely accompaniment of and accessory to the divine Word, integrated into a divine movement."[12]

In *The Domain of the Word*, Webster frequently adverts to the language of semiotics to express the relationship between the creaturely word (the "sign") and the divine Word (that which is signified).[13] So, for example, the words of Scripture

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9. Bavinck says something similar when he writes of how "the immediate revelation is made mediate" in the servant-form of Holy Scripture. (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:382.) However, Bavinck construes the relationship between revelation and Scripture differently from Webster, as we shall see.

10. Webster, *DoW*, 10. The relationship is not be interpreted "occasionally or accidentally." This means that "we need not be overzealous in separating divine Word and human service, or too pessimistic about God's capacity to sanctify human texts." It is likely that Webster here offers a corrective to Barth's approach, which by 2012 he had probably come to see as "overzealous" in this regard.

11. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 38.

12. Webster, *DoW*, 8.

13. In his earlier work Webster chose not follow Barth in his description of Scripture as a "sign" which "point[s] to a superior authority confronting the proclamation of the Church."

are "divinely instituted signs" which point to the *res* that is revelation.[14] The signs "remain human, not divine or angelic words," yet they "bear the divine Word to their hearers [...] by way of the mystery of divine institution."[15] Again, the words of

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See Barth, *CD*, II.1, 457. "Sign" language does not feature at all in the *Dogmatic Sketch*, but is a later development. In the previous chapter, attention was drawn to Webster's appeal for the "recovery of a *participatory* understanding of biblical semiotics," according to which Scripture "is understood to *partake* in the unfolding of the realities which it depicts." (Webster, *DoW*, 12. Emphasis added.) Webster is probably leaning on Augustine's *De Doctrina* in his use of the language of signs, as evidenced by his citations from this work in *DoW*. See Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*.

For Augustine, *every word* is a sign: "No one uses words except as signs of something else." (Ibid., 1:2.) God, who is by nature "unspeakable," has nevertheless "condescended to accept the worship of men's mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in His praise." (Ibid., 1:.6.) Such speech is a function of divine grace, on an incarnational principle of accommodation: "of this [here Augustine refers to "the purification of the soul," but the principle has broader application to all human speech about God] we should have been wholly incapable, had not Wisdom condescended to adapt Himself to our weakness, and to show us a pattern of holy life in the form of our own humanity." (Ibid., 1:11.) According to Augustine's view, it is always necessary to follow the indication of the sign to the thing signified: "he [...] who either uses or honours a useful sign divinely appointed, whose force and significance he understands, does not honour the sign which is seen and temporal, but that to which all such signs refer." (Ibid., 3:9.)

The language of *res* and *signum* for describing the relationship between the divine Word and the words of Scripture is helpful up to a point, but it will be argued below that Webster does not bring these two into a sufficiently close relation. Indeed, this *may* be a problem in Augustine too. As John Milbank writes,

> Augustine's theology was framed in such a way as to posit a purely instrumental status for language, restoring meaning as *ante vocem*. While signs are necessary, just as teaching is necessary, both belong to *usus* rather than *fruitio* and their point is to recall *res*, and finally to recall spiritual *res* in the soul, where Christ speaks, wordlessly.
>
> As a consequence, even the signs that constitute the Bible are for Augustine ultimately no more than teaching instruments, almost dispensable for the mature Christian.

See John Milbank, "Theology Without Substance: Christianity, Signs, Origins: Part One," *Literature and Theology* 2, no. 1 (1988), 8. On the one hand, Webster insists that we never get *beyond* the words of Scripture, yet on the other hand his use of the *res*/*signum* distinction needs continual restraining if it is not to move in the direction Milbank indicates.

14. Webster, *DoW*, 9.

15. Ibid., 10.

Scripture are "creaturely" and "human," but "not purely 'natural'," because in the economy of grace "the signs serve as the authorized exponents of the divine Word."[16] Darren Sarisky rightly observes that Webster comes to utilise the language of signs in this way in part due to his work on the doctrine of creation.[17] Sarisky thinks Webster might have worked this out more fully: his critique will be considered in more detail in the next chapter. But "sign" language is only one set of conceptual tools which Webster deploys, in this instance limited to his later work. Here, the focus will be on some other concepts that Webster develops diachronically throughout the period of his constructive theological output.

By way of material summary of the approach to be followed in this chapter, consider the following paragraph from Webster's 2003 book, *Holiness*:

> [T]he revelatory presence of God is set forth in Holy Scripture. God's communicative presence is encountered through Scripture as the Holy One speaks his Word, for Holy Scripture is that creaturely instrument inspired and appointed by God to serve God's self-presentation. These texts are, to put the matter scripturally, 'from God', for in them those 'moved by the Holy Spirit spoke' (2 Pet. 1.21). Holy Scripture is the result of a divine movement; it is generated not simply by human spontaneity but by the moving power of the Holy Spirit. That moving power so orders these human, textual acts of communication that they may fittingly serve the publication of the knowledge of God.[18]

At the very least, the following may be identified as the salient points of the above statement: (1) Holy Scripture *serves* revelation (or, we might say, the *words* serve the *Word*) *instrumentally* in ancillary capacity;[19] (2) there is a "fittingness" to

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16. Ibid., 11.

17. Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 18.

18. Webster, *Holiness*, 17-18. Emphasis removed.

19. Compare the statement: "Holy Scripture is the [...] instrument of God's loving address of intelligent creatures." (Webster, *DoW*, vii.) Along similar lines, elsewhere Webster writes that Scripture is a "creaturely assistant [...] of Christ's φωνὴ μεγάλη." (Ibid., 44.)

the appointment of the particular words of Holy Scripture to the service of revelation (although Webster's view as to exactly what constitutes this "fittingness" develops, as we shall see); (3) the event of revelation (in which the saving presence of God is mediated to creatures in a divine-human encounter) is repeatedly enacted as God speaks his Word by means of the God-breathed words of Holy Scripture; (4) in the process by which Scripture comes to be, creaturely agency follows divine agency in willing correspondence, in such a way that divine agency never usurps or vitiates human agency; (5) the words of Holy Scripture, for all their humanity, are *from God*, generated by the power of his Spirit. These points remain central to Webster's doctrine of Scripture throughout his work. All this may be fittingly encapsulated as *the mystery of revelational mediacy*.

In this chapter, following the later Webster's own exposition, we note that positively, he identifies and expounds three "aspect[s] of the mystery of the divine Word as human words," namely, (1) providence, (2) sanctification, and (3) inspiration.[20] Negatively, in his earlier work he rejects (or at least expresses reservations in respect of) the use of two concepts which have commonly been deployed in the Reformed tradition: (1) accommodation, and (2) an incarnational analogy.[21] A critical discussion of Webster's treatment of these positive and negative aspects in this chapter prepares the way for a concluding chapter that draws together the various strands of the argument so far in a summative assessment, and moves towards a constructive proposal.

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20. Ibid., 16.

21. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 22-23. In respect of accommodation, Webster appears to change his mind. This shift and its consequences will be explored below.

5.2 Aspects of the Mystery

For Webster, each of the three aspects of "the mystery of the divine Word as human words" serves to guard against a potential problem. Thus, *providence* is deployed to counter secularism or naturalism. *Sanctification* is invoked, at least in Webster's earlier work, in part to respond to the alleged ontological and ethical lack that makes human beings unfitting recipients of revelation. Webster's approach in respect of this issue is later nuanced in more Thomistic terms as he gradually lays to rest Barth's unease on this point. For the later Webster, the concept of sanctification is principally useful as it enables him to hold together the divine and human aspects of verbal communication, or the "transcendent and [the] historical."[22] The function of *inspiration* is – among other things – to confirm Scripture's *settled* nature, and thereby to protect against its supersession. The following sub-sections explain and evaluate Webster's treatment of these three "aspects" of the mystery, in conversation with some of his principal dialogue partners, especially Barth, Aquinas, and Bavinck.

5.2.1 Providence

As Kevin Vanhoozer has written, "[p]erhaps the *single most important aspect* of the doctrine of God which has a bearing on the doctrine of Scripture is divine providence."[23] The later John Webster might well have agreed with this assessment. Yet of the three "aspects of the mystery" discussed here, providence is notably lacking a specific treatment in his earlier work, including the *Dogmatic Sketch*. There it is, like "mediation," subsumed under Webster's discussion of

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22. Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 6.

23. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grover: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 128-29. Emphasis added.

sanctification: his reasoning is that the latter term "covers much of the same ground as [providence and mediation], whilst also addressing in a direct way the relation of divine activity to creaturely process, without sliding into dualism."[24] Why should Webster have changed his mind ten years later about the prominence given to providence in his doctrine of Scripture?

Part of the answer is Webster's growing dissatisfaction with Barth's approach to the doctrines of creation and providence. Initially, much of the attraction of Barth for Webster had been the Swiss' resistance of modern theology's attempt to offer an apologetic for the legitimacy of speaking about God through its formulation of these doctrines.[25] Barth stood firmly against this trend, beginning with the Creator and moving to the creation as an article of faith.[26] He took the humanity of Jesus Christ to be "the guarantee of the independent existence of the creation."[27] Furthermore, Barth defined creation resolutely in terms of its *end*, in other words, the covenant of grace, and the outworking of that covenant, in the reality of which he understood creation to be "wholly enclosed."[28]

By the time Webster wrote the opening chapter to *The Domain of the Word*, he still thought that Barth was right to begin with God, but he had become convinced that Barth's teleological account of creation would not bear the necessary metaphysics to account for creaturely being and givenness in the sphere of *nature*. Webster cites Aquinas, noting that providence is "a necessity of nature."[29] Within

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24. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 10.

25. Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 59.

26. Ibid., 62.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 63-64.

29. Webster, *DoW*, 15. Webster gives the citation as Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 103.1 ad 1. In fact, the quoted wording comes not from the *ad primum*, but from Thomas' response

this new, more Thomistic, paradigm, the doctrine of providence begins to take on a fresh significance for Webster.

In chapter three above, we have observed how the later Webster allows the doctrine of providence to function as a sort of dogmatic "bridge" between the works of God *ad intra* and his works *ad extra*, to enable a proper articulation of the relation of God to creatures. Providence thus "straddl[es] both theology and economy" and "pervades dogmatics."[30] Materially, providence is the loving, divine ordination (preservation, concurrence, and governance) of creaturely being and history, to the ultimate end of the attainment of creaturely perfection.[31] God "gives not only *substantia* but *finis*," and in the case of his human creatures that *finis* is "fellowship with God."[32]

In Webster's doctrine of Scripture, providence is deployed as an antidote to modern dualisms which pit divine agency against human agency: "God's providential activity does not force created realities against their natures, but orders those natures in such a way that they move themselves to their true end."[33] But in addition, invoking the concept of "providence" allows Webster to account for divine action in the history of Scripture within the widest of possible panoramata, *viz.,* "God's providential ordering of *all things* in accordance with his wisdom and by the

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to the third objection.

30. That is to say, providence is rather like revelation in this respect. See Webster, "On the Theology of Providence," repr. as "Providence," in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, eds. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), also repr. as "On the theology of providence," in *GWM*, 1:127-141. The citations above are from ibid., 1:128.

31. Ibid., 1:134.

32. Ibid., 1:135.

33. Webster, *DoW*, 15. See also his affirmation that "God's governance secures the creature's freedom" in Webster, *GWM*, 1:139.

operation of his power."[34] This universal context functions as the antidote to the naturalisation or secularisation of the history in which the texts of Scripture come to be, for the doctrine of providence (alongside that of creation) grounds all talk of nature or culture in God himself.[35] The creaturely phenomenon that is Holy Scripture is therefore providentially appointed by God to serve the end of creaturely fellowship with God.

5.2.2 Sanctification

John Webster's idiosyncratic deployment of the concept of sanctification in his doctrine of Scripture is one of his work's most notable distinguishing features, and so it will be examined here in some detail. In traditional Reformed theology, "sanctification" is an aspect of soteriology.[36] However, Webster uses the terminology in an original way in his doctrine of Scripture.[37]

In Webster's earlier constructive work, the concept of sanctification helps overcome the supposed deficiencies (ontological and ethical) in human nature that would seem to make revelation an impossibility. Webster first introduced in print the language of "sanctification" – alongside "annexation" – to describe the processes by which the human texts of Scripture are "taken up" for use in the divine economy,

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34. Webster, *DoW*, 14. Emphasis added.

35. Ibid.

36. See, for example, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 13, "On Sanctification."

37. Notwithstanding the claim that Webster is original at this point, in 1894 B. B. Warfield did establish an analogy between the Spirit's work in grace, to the sanctification of the believer, and his work in inspiration. See Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Divine and Human in the Bible," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 2:546. Like Webster, Warfield's intention was to hold together immanence and transcendence in his account of the origin of Scripture. I am indebted to Mark Garcia for this reference.

in an essay on the canon from 2001.[38] In the same year, maintaining that the language of Christology is at once *necessary* and *imperfect*, Webster made a series of interesting points that would come to shape his developing doctrine of Scripture. First, concepts expressed in human words must be sanctified, if the Christian is to be able to think and speak truly and faithfully. This "sanctification" Webster also refers to as "the conversion of concepts."[39] Such conversion is the work of Jesus himself, who "annexes" thought and speech about himself. At the same time, such thought and speech "always stand on the threshold of breakdown, in the midst of crisis of the fact of their own unsuitability for the task they have to perform."[40] Webster is speaking here of what we might call "secondary" theological language, rather than about the words of the biblical witness *per se*, but it seems reasonable to assume that his point might be extended to include the words of Scripture, even allowing for the fact that the scriptural witness "governs" the conceptual matter of dogma.[41] This particular construction shows the influence of the early Barth's view of the inherent unsuitability of human language to express the divine Word, and thus reflects something of the dialectical occasionalism that characterised Barth's view of Scripture in the divine economy.[42]

In the *Dogmatic Sketch*, Webster uses the language of "sanctification" with a more specifically bibliological application, to enable him to preserve "God's continuing free presence and relation to the creation through the risen Son in the Spirit's power," while at the same time accounting for "creaturely activities and

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38. Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of the Canon," in *W&C*, 10.

39. John Webster, "Incarnation," in *W&C*, 123.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 124.

42. See below on Barth's doctrine of Scripture. Webster came to develop and nuance this position, as we shall see.

products [which] can be made to serve the saving self-presentation of God without forfeiting their creaturely substance."[43] Sanctification is effective at precisely this point, because it allows the articulation of a "dogmatic ontology of the biblical texts which elides neither their creatureliness nor their relation to the free self-communication of God."[44] Thus Brad East refers to sanctification as Webster's "middle path" for describing the uniqueness of the Bible "as a product and instrument of divine action and use, without sacrificing its creaturely character."[45] As we have seen in previous chapters, this *via media* is between what Webster calls "naturalism" and "supernaturalism."[46]

How does the idea of sanctification open up such a path? As Webster summarises, "[a]t its most basic, the notion states that the biblical texts are creaturely realities set apart by the triune God to serve his self-presence."[47] As argued above, divine "self-presence" is short-hand for all that is included in Webster's definition of "revelation."[48] By "creaturely realities" (whether "creaturely entities"[49] [natural] or "creaturely processes" [historical][50]) Webster means those

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43. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 21.

44. Ibid.

45. East, "The Church's Book," 130-31.

46. One theologian who has criticised Webster's use of the concept of sanctification in the *Dogmatic Sketch* is Donald A. Carson. See D. A. Carson, "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," in *Collected Writings on Scripture*. For Michael Allen, however, Carson's criticisms of Webster's use of the concept are unwarranted, as they are answered by Webster's own recognition of the limits of the concept, and his use elsewhere of the terminology of inspiration to address some of Carson's concerns. (Allen, "Toward Theological Theology," 226n.)

47. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 21.

48. See, for example, ibid., 11-17.

49. For this designation, see ibid., 20. See also the reference to creaturely "products" in ibid., 21.

50. For this designation, see ibid., 17. See also the reference to creaturely "activities" in ibid.,

things – in this case, texts, and the sequences of historical events by which those texts come to, and continue to, be – that have a "natural history,"[51] and the integrity of which as *creaturely* is no way compromised by divine involvement or use. In Webster's vocabulary, sanctification has "diachronic reach."[52] This means that it extends (horizontally, we might say) into historical and temporal process, and accounts for a lasting and established product. In the following sub-sections, Webster's development of the concept of sanctification is considered in conversation with some of his most significant dialogue-partners, to enable a sharper specification of the way that the idea functions in his bibliology.

5.2.2.1 From Barth to Aquinas

The paradigm within which Webster is working early in his career is basically Barth's,[53] in terms of both (i) the relationship between divine and human agency,

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51. Ibid., 19.

52. The description is Sarisky's: it is entirely apposite. See Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 7. As Sarisky points out, this is why Webster finds the term more satisfactory than "testimony," which is arguably more patent of an interruptive or temporary interpretation.

53. In an early interpretative essay, Webster offers a helpful summary of Barth's doctrine of Scripture, "skeletally expressed," in *CD*: "Scripture is witness: it is not identical with revelation, but that instrument through which the testimony of the prophets and apostles is set before us." This means that there are two elements in Barth's treatment that must be kept in mind and related in his exposition, namely, that of the human "limitation" of Scripture, and that which is "positive" in the identification of Scripture as "revelation as it comes to us." Barth expresses the relation between these two elements in terms of an analogy with the hypostatic union. The principal implication for hermeneutics is that the Bible must be read as a human word, for all that the human word is "caught up into revelation." See Webster, ""In the Shadow of Biblical Work"," repr. as "Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer," in *W&C*, 95-96.
For a useful introduction to Barth's bibliology, see Mary Kathleen Cunningham, "Karl Barth," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture*, ed. Holcomb.

and (ii) the relationship between nature and grace.[54] For Barth, human agency is "limited,"[55] but not in a negative sense: rather, the limitation corresponds to what it means to be a creature. As Webster says, "limitation" means for Barth something like "specificity" or "particular shape."[56] In *CD* III.3, where Barth discusses providence, he presents the lordship of God "over and in creaturely occurrence [...] not as *restrictive*, but as what might be called an act of *purposive integration*, through which the definiteness of the creature is upheld."[57] This means that God's preserving (*conservatio*) allows for creaturely actuality within creaturely limitation.[58] God's ruling (*gubernatio*) means God's enabling the creature "to move towards its particular given end."[59] All of this providential agency leads towards "the creature's quite specific path to glory assigned and maintained by the ordering acts of God."[60] In his earlier work, Webster applies this framework to the creaturely

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54. What follows in respect of Barth will inevitably be a simplification. Barth's view of the relationship between divine and human agency has been a sharply-contested area in Barth studies. In addition, as Kenneth Oakes has observed, "[t]o unearth what Barth thinks about nature and grace is by no means a simple task." See Kenneth Oakes, "The Question of Nature and Grace in Karl Barth: Humanity as Creature and as Covenant-Partner," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 4 (2007), 598. The principal focus here will therefore be on *Webster's* interpretation of Barth, without extensive comment on whether Webster has interpreted Barth correctly or not.

55. Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 71.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid. Emphasis original.

58. Ibid., 72.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid. Interestingly, for Webster, the designation of an entity or process as "creaturely" seems to carry with it certain implications about the possibility of its being impeccable. Webster does not say as part of his discussion of Scripture that creatureliness necessarily implies fallenness, but in an important and nuanced paragraph on the incarnation, Webster defends his assertion that the Word "assumes sinful flesh." (See Webster, "Incarnation," in *W&C*, 140-41.) As it did for Barth, this Christological decision probably has an impact on how Webster understands the creaturely nature of the Bible, as something necessarily subject in some way to (ontological or ethical) imperfection, *by virtue of its creatureliness*.

reality that is Scripture by means of the concept of sanctification: in the *historia scripturae*, God works, and human agents work in correspondence. Sanctification encompasses "the full range of processes in which the text is caught up from pre-textual tradition to interpretation."[61] This divine work is designated the "use" of creaturely realities, but Webster is at pains to stress that this use is "not simply occasional or punctiliar, an act from above which arrests and overwhelms the creaturely reality, employs it, and then puts it to one side."[62] Rather, divine use has an irreducible "horizontal" dimension as well as a "vertical": "[t]here is an election and overseeing of the entire historical course of the creaturely reality so that it becomes a creature which may serve the purposes of God."[63] This horizontal aspect serves to protect against the mistaken view that God "adopts" a pre-existing text and (later) sets it apart for divine use. Indeed, Webster specifically guards against the danger of an "adoptionistic" construction, by extending his description of the Spirit's role in sanctification to include "*all* the processes of the text's production, preservation and interpretation."[64] He uses the terminology of *sanctitas aliena* and *sanctitas infusa* to underline this point. The holiness of Scripture is *alien*, to the extent that it is the gift of a sovereign Lord, but it is *infused* in the sense that it is part of the creation and preservation of "genuine and inalienable creaturely substance."[65]

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61. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 26.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid., 24. Emphasis added. Somewhat ironically, Webster is content to use the language of Christological heresy to guard against going *wrong* in a doctrine of Scripture, even though he will not advert to the language of Christological orthodoxy to defend what he thinks is *right*! See discussion of Webster's rejection of the incarnational analogy in respect of Scripture below.

65. Ibid., 27.

In terms of the relationship between nature and grace, Webster's dependence on Barth is more subtle. Reference to a "Barthian" paradigm in respect of this question is not uncomplicated because a close reading of Barth's work reveals a clearly-discernible change in his own approach, one which Webster himself details in his interpretative work. Given these caveats, the earlier Barth's view may be summed up as follows: (human) nature has been twisted by sin; indeed, in Barth's view, there is no nature that is not fallen.[66] God and humanity thus have no intrinsic connection. One consequence of this position is that humanity is intrinsically unable to receive divine revelation (*incapax Dei*). Although some recent revisionist scholarship on Barth has nuanced the picture somewhat, it is probably fair to say that the early Barth offered what "seem[ed] like, and indeed was taken as, a complete sundering of humanity and God."[67] Leaving to one side the much-debated question of what Barth *really meant*, in his early works, at the very least "Barth made it too easy to read him as positing a relation between God and humanity only in those occasional moments when God interrupts a rebellious humanity."[68]

Barth did, of course, believe that such moments of divine interruption happen. Precisely because grace is *grace*, and on the basis of the covenant, Barth argued that "creatureliness" is not itself a barrier to the receipt of revelation, even if such reception must take the form of an astonishing, dialectical event which is wholly dependent on God and which takes place in spite of the creatureliness of the creature. Barth's famous rejection of general revelation and natural theology has its

66. Barth continued to hold this view throughout his career. In his own words, "There never was a golden age. There is no point in looking back to one. The first man was immediately the first sinner." See Karl Barth, *CD*, IV.1, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 508.

67. Oakes, "Nature and Grace in Karl Barth," 610.

68. Ibid.

ground in the absolute necessity of this event. It explains why Barth focused entirely on divine grace as the only ground of revelation.

Later, and partly in response to his Roman Catholic interlocutors, Barth modified his position somewhat.[69] Critics had pointed out that if there is no intrinsic relationship between God and humans after the Fall, then Barth's view of revelation is compromised, because "Barth makes human talk about God functionally equivocal."[70] In addition, they suggested that Barth's doctrine of faith and salvation was rendered incoherent without at least *some sort* of intrinsic relationship. Barth's solution – "striking in its simplicity"[71] – was to establish a commonality of sorts by means of the *analogia fidei*, a commonality which "exists only as an *extrinsic* capacity made available to humans in and through their participation in Christ by grace."[72] Further, on the basis of his later, refined view of "creation as the external basis of the covenant," and "the covenant as the internal basis of creation,"[73] Barth was able to argue (from his exposition of the doctrine of election in *CD* II.2 onwards) that creation is *prepared* for just such an interruptive event of divine grace as he had previously posited as necessary for revelation. There is no creation in abstract of covenant. The created order "exists precisely in order to be the space where the covenant is executed."[74] Human beings are thus, after all, "intrinsically capable" of receiving divine revelation, on the basis of an "intrinsic analogy of being" of a

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69. Ibid., 605.

70. Keith L. Johnson, "Natural Revelation in Creation and Covenant," in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, eds. Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 143.

71. Ibid., 145.

72. Ibid., 143. Emphasis added.

73. See the mature account of this position in the sections with these titles in Karl Barth, *CD*, III.1, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 94-329.

74. Johnson, "Natural Revelation in Creation and Covenant," 135.

certain, particular, kind. At every point, "this analogy is grounded in God's eternal electing decision rather than his act of creation, and ultimately, it is grounded in Christ himself."[75]

We may note the significant influence of this Barthian view on the earlier John Webster (represented by the *Dogmatic Sketch*). For the earlier Webster, following Barth, (i) Christology is fundamental, even within a wider Trinitarian approach to dogmatics, (ii) the covenant is foundational and definitive in its relation to creation, and (iii) nature *qua* nature is unfitted for revelation, but "creatureliness" does not in itself render natural persons, processes, and products incapable of being annexed to divine revelationary purpose, *by virtue (power) of grace*. According to this paradigm, persons, products, and processes that are sanctified by God always remain creaturely: "[s]egregation, election to holiness, is not the abolition of creatureliness but its creation and preservation."[76] But at the same time, these are "not simply 'natural' entities, to be defined and interpreted exhaustively as such."[77] Rather, they are "fields of the Spirit's activity in the publication of the knowledge of God." Webster preserves at this point a fine distinction between what is "natural," and what is "creaturely," so that an entity (like a biblical text) may still be "creaturely" without resort to "the antithesis of nature and supernature." Because the text is always creaturely, sanctification is not divinisation. Rather, "[s]anctification is the Spirit's act of ordering creaturely history and being to the end of acting as *ancilla Domini*."[78]

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75. Ibid., 146-47.

76. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 27.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid., 28.

At this point, then, Webster is close to Barth. He certainly does not have in mind some sort of *donum superadditum*, by means of which a natural reality (say, a text) is raised to higher capabilities. Rather, a "sanctified" text runs along a sort of dual track: it is irreducibly creaturely, with a natural history of its own, but at the same time it has a place in that divine history which constitutes the covenant of grace and serves the revelatory purposes of God. It is this latter, divine, history that is foundational, on the principle that the created order serves the covenant. Yet even in his earlier formulations, Webster does not follow Barth entirely. His formula pushes back at Barth's apparent occasionalism, because, for Webster, the holiness of Scripture is not conferred on it by a sort of divine *fiat*, but through, and by means of, the exigencies of historical process, so that Scripture comes – *in space and time* – to be fitted for divine use and purpose.

For the later Webster, things look somewhat different. That is, in sum, because Webster comes to accept Aquinas' axiom that "nature is perfected by grace."[79] Therefore, in *The Domain of the Word*, Webster's account of sanctification remains very similar (formally and materially) to that outlined above, but it is modulated in a Thomistic key, with significantly more attention given to the doctrine of creation. No longer is creation to be understood as wholly enclosed in the covenant, so that the *opus gratiae* has precedence over the *opus naturae*. There is a turn to Thomas Aquinas, who "understands the saving work of Christ as an element *within* a more basic order of creation and return."[80] Just so, for the later Webster,

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79. Barth and Aquinas are sometimes thought of as being polar opposites in respect of these questions. However, Keith L. Johnson has argued that there is actually a significant degree of similarity between Aquinas and Barth in their common belief that "God is revealed in and through the created order and that theologians can and should incorporate insights derived from this natural revelation into the church's theology," even if "crucial material differences remain between their views." See Johnson, "Natural Revelation in Creation and Covenant," 129.

80. Ibid., 152.

following Thomas, nature comes first and has its own integrity, even as fallen nature strives towards glorious perfection by means of the grace of God. Webster now writes of sanctification as "a work of the Holy Spirit which *realizes* created nature in fulfilment of the eternal divine will set forth in the Son."[81] Such realisation demands both cleansing and consummation: it is of the order of both grace and glory. Thus, it is a cathartic work, for human speech is fallen and disordered, and therefore needs to be cleansed. It is also a completing work, "a work by which redemption fulfils creaturely nature."[82] In terms of the sanctification of Scripture, a Thomistic paradigm means that the texts of the Bible (at once "creaturely" and "natural") must be viewed as created elements which possess their own integrity as human texts, but which have been set apart (in a way that comports with their concreated potential to be made holy) for instrumental use in the divine self-presentation, or revelation.

On a Thomistic view, the "natural" capacity of (human) creatures to receive divine revelation in proportion to the end to which they are ordered (*viz.* God himself) needs "sacred doctrine" to realise its *telos*. Nevertheless, by natural reason, human beings can and do make true judgments about God. For Aquinas, "the two types of knowledge [natural and sanctified] stand in an intimate and ongoing relationship with one another."[83] Sacred doctrine gives knowledge of God that does not contradict the knowledge that derives from human reason, but perfects and fulfils it. This is the basis for Aquinas' acceptance of natural theology, in apparently stark contrast to the early Barth. The implications for human language about God are, as Johnson recognises, that (i) "the concepts derived from natural reason have a role to play in human speech about God," but (ii) these concepts must be "refined by the supernatural knowledge found in sacred doctrine." This "refining" – or

81. Webster, *DoW*, 15. Emphasis original.

82. Ibid., 16.

83. Johnson, "Natural Revelation in Creation and Covenant," 137.

"unveiling," as Johnson also refers to it – happens by grace. These principles may be applied in an account of Scripture, and the argument here is that they do in fact form the basis of the later Webster's view of "sanctification."

Thus, for the later Webster, Scripture's "natural" history is realised and perfected by the gracious, divine work of sanctification, whereby Scripture may be used instrumentally to effect the divine work of revelation. What has changed is that Webster moves even more definitively from a more "interruptive" notion of sanctification that characterises at least some of his expression in the *Dogmatic Sketch*, to a more "developmental" view, according to which human texts come to serve revelation as they are moved along a linguistic, conceptual, and spiritual continuum to their function in the domain of the Word.[84] It must be noted that this "continuum" is not exactly temporal or *chrono*logical, although it has an historical aspect. It is not as though the texts were once purely natural but later they came to be perfected by grace for holy purposes. Rather, the continuum described here is a *logical* means of expressing the continuity between nature and grace. If, for the earlier Webster, Scripture's ontology sometimes seemed to run on two, parallel tracks, with two, parallel histories (a divine history and a human history), somehow connected by the gracious action of God, then for the later Webster, the track is much more obviously a single one, with one *archē* and one *telos*, beginning in nature and completed by the sanctifying grace that perfects nature.[85] Either model might be

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84. Nevertheless, Sarisky thinks that still "more needs to be done in order to establish *an organic connection* between the Bible's contingent circumstances of origin and its testimony to the triune God." (See Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 2. Emphasis added.) Sarisky's complaint will be assessed in the next chapter.

85. Webster himself makes this point in similar terms when he writes that "[w]hen we say that God orders the course of [the texts of Scripture] to serve his self-manifestation, we are not describing a second history running alongside their natural history – a mythological *Doppelgänger* to the history of human religion and textual poetics. We are simply saying what the history of Scripture *is*." (See Webster, *DoW*, 15.)

used to combat Enlightenment dualisms (and that is indeed how Webster employs them) but he develops a clear preference for the latter version, in line with the changes in his theological architectonics. In summary, the underlying shift was from a broadly Barthian view, according to which *grace* is fundamental and nature is in some way secondary or derivative, to a more Thomistic view, according to which *nature* is fundamental. As we shall see in the next chapter, Webster did not entirely embrace a Thomistic paradigm, preferring to reserve "revelation" for that which pertains to covenantal grace.

5.2.2.2 From Above or From Below?

Another way of specifying the function of "sanctification" in Webster's doctrine of Scripture relates to the distinction between approaches to Scripture "from below" and "from above."[86] In Frank Hasel's typology of contemporary Protestant thinkers along these lines, Karl Barth is a leading example of the Scripture "from below" approach.[87] This is because Barth resolutely refuses, as we have seen, to connect the divine act of revelation with the human text of Scripture in any ontological sense. Scripture always remains a human word, a witness to God's revelation. Hasel shows that, "[i]n contrast to Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg believes in the existence of some form of contact between God and man."[88] Pannenberg locates this "point of contact" in man's "*self-transcending* openness to

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86. This distinction is made by Frank Hasel, who structures his study of the doctrine of Scripture in contemporary Protestant theology in these terms. See Frank M. Hasel, *Scripture in the Theologies of W. Pannenberg and D. G. Bloesch: An Investigation and Assessment of its Origin, Nature and Use* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), 28.

87. Ibid., 86-90. Here, Hasel's categorisation of Barth as a "from below" thinker in respect of Scripture is presented without comment on the appropriateness or otherwise of the designation.

88. Ibid., 144-45.

the world and to God," arguing in particular that "[i]n its ecstatic form human minds participate in the divine Spirit."[89] Revelation, therefore, "does not come from *above* but takes place indirectly *as* history."[90] The Bible is "a historical document that reports and reflects in purely human words man's experience with the divine [...I]t is never prescriptive but only descriptive."[91] Despite this distinction between Barth and Pannenberg, both theologians are placed firmly in the Scripture "from below" category.

On the other hand, Donald Bloesch's understanding of Scripture typifies the "from above" approach.[92] As Hasel notes, this places Bloesch at a distance from Barth, despite the latter's clear influence on his theology.[93] Unlike Barth and P. T. Forsyth, Bloesch insisted that inspiration pertained to the written product that is Scripture.[94] Revelation, for Bloesch, is not to be equated with God's self-revelation or with Jesus Christ, and may include noetic content and verbal aspects.[95] But Bloesch is different from the Reformed orthodox and from more conservative evangelical theologians, in that he argues that the words of Scripture are not directly revealed.[96] This denial is not simply a rejection of dictation theories of authorship, but goes further: Bloesch describes the language of Scripture as "mythopoetic." Unlike

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89. Ibid., 145.

90. Ibid., 156.

91. Ibid., 157.

92. Ibid., 173.

93. Ibid., 173n. Following Barth, Bloesch maintained that Scripture is a "witness" to revelation, rather than revelation *per se*.

94. Ibid., 175. Webster agrees, as we shall see.

95. Ibid., 219. If this is indeed the correct way of interpreting Bloesch, he is not precisely the same as Webster, who prefers to restrict the concept of revelation to divine *self*-revelation, even though he approves of the idea of inspiration in a more traditional sense.

96. Ibid., 178.

Webster, Bloesch works with a Christological analogy for explaining the divinity and humanity of the Bible, and he argues for a "union but not a fusion between the divine content and its worldly form."[97] The union is effected by the action of the Holy Spirit. Bloesch refers to this as a "sacramental" view of Scripture.[98] According to Hasel's analysis, Bloesch tried to "combine two distinct positions: that of the pre-modern and pre-Kantian Protestant Reformers, who maintained the cognitive revelation of divine truths in Scripture and Kant's observation that human reason by itself can yield knowledge only of the phenomenal world but has no access to the noumenal realm, which includes God."[99] Bloesch employs this paradigm because of its supposed explanatory power for holding together the transcendent divine truth and the fallible human element of Scripture. There is, in Bloesch's term, a "conjunction" between these two by the agency of the Spirit, but the two are "conjoined only in a dialectical and paradoxical manner."[100]

Where does John Webster fit in the "from above" / "from below" categories? It seems that his use of the concept of "sanctification" is an attempt to escape the dichotomy altogether. Aspects of both approaches apply to Webster. Bloesch's elaboration of his own view in an interview, cited by Hasel, is illuminating:

> [T]he Holy Spirit takes the written text and makes this text serve the Word of God. I would not identify the text as human language with the Word of God; I would say the Holy Spirit takes the text and makes it serve God so that it becomes part of the Word of God; so that it is taken up into the Word of God but it always remains a human text.[101]

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97. Ibid., 180-81. The citation is from Donald G. Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call for Unity Amid Diversity* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 119.

98. Hasel, *Scripture in the Theologies of W. Pannenberg and D. G. Bloesch*, 181-82.

99. Ibid., 219.

100. Ibid., 247.

101. Bloesch gave this interview on 10 January 1994. It is cited in ibid., 179n.

This language sounds very similar to Webster's understanding of "sanctification." Like Bloesch, and unlike Barth, Webster believes in plenary, verbal inspiration of the words of Scripture. Like Barth, and unlike Bloesch, Webster believes that revelation is always God's *self*-revelation. "Sanctification" is intended to emphasise the closest of relationships between the divine Word (from above) and the human words (from below), without confounding them, or creating a form/ content distinction (or even dualism) such as that with which Bloesch operates. The question of whether or not Webster's account of sanctification is fully successful along these lines will be addressed in the next chapter.

5.2.3 Inspiration

As noted in chapter four above, Webster "locates" the inspiration of Scripture in his account of its causes or authorship.[102] Many of the aspects that come together to establish what Webster refers to as the "adequacy" of an account of inspiration have already been treated in this thesis, including those of divine and human causality understood in a relationship of non-competitive interaction, and the robust articulation of the doctrines of creation and pneumatology. Repetition of these themes need not detain us here, but a few brief additional comments may be helpful.

In his affirmation of a verbal, and "organic" rather than "mechanical" understanding of inspiration, Webster closely follows many other Reformed and evangelical writers, and in this sense his view is not original or controversial.[103] He

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[102.] Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 238.

[103.] Webster, *DoW*, 17. Webster particularly cites G. C. Berkouwer, but a similar view is taught by a spectrum of modern writers from Bavinck to Cornelius Van Til. See further the discussion of Van Til below. Note that an "organic" view of inspiration is different to the concept of "organicism" in theology more generally, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

defines inspiration as "the *verbal* aspects of the Spirit's superintendence of the creaturely auxiliaries of the Word," so that "God speaks as inspired Scripture speaks."[104] This understanding of inspiration as plenary and verbal is present from early on in Webster's writing on the doctrine of Scripture.[105] What, then, if anything, has actually changed for the later Webster? It is only in his latest work that he explicitly departs company from Barth on inspiration: we might say that Webster's working out of the implications of inspiration "catches up" with his statement of the doctrine. He recalls the early Barth's concerns about verbal inspiration supposedly compromising the distinction between revelation and Scripture, and "making Scripture into a deposit of revealedness."[106] However, Webster concludes, Barth's worry is "misplaced: verbal inspiration does not eliminate what Barth later called "God's action in the Bible," but simply indicates one kind of action that God performs in relation to Scripture. Verbal inspiration is an extension of (not a replacement for) the theology of divine instruction."[107] Webster does at this point lay to rest an old concern, which he had shared with Barth. There is something new here. But this does *not* mean Webster comes to the view that Scripture is, after all, to be identified with revelation, but rather that he believes an adequate doctrine of

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104. Ibid., 16. Or, more fully, "inspiration is that work of God the Spirit by which the prophets and apostles, as God's chosen instruments, called, sanctified, and equipped with necessary gifts by divine grace, are caused to write, so that their acts of authorship and their products come to serve God's work of instructing the people of God." Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 244.

105. *Pace* Sanders, who suggests that it was only in one of Webster's very late essays that he "finally made explicit his willingness to retrieve a more classical doctrine of Scripture, all the way down to the doctrine of inspiration." (See Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 19.) In fact, all three of the supposedly "new" theses that Sanders identifies from Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture" may be found just as explicitly stated in Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 37-39.

106. Webster, "On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture," 246. The citations Webster offers are from Barth's *Göttingen Dogmatics*.

107. Ibid.

inspiration will *guard against* precisely this conclusion,[108] while protecting the understanding of God's ongoing relation to the Bible.

An important corollary of inspiration for Webster is that Scripture may be defined in terms of a "settlement of the divine Word."[109] Again, care is needed to specify that Webster is not thinking in terms of "a deposit of 'inspiredness'."[110] Once again, this is fundamentally about the relationship between the Word and the words. Webster writes:

> [W]ith God's breathing of Holy Scripture, a stage is reached in the self-publication of the divine Word from which all subsequent reception of the Word will derive and by which it will be determined. After inspiration, there is for creatures *in via* no further – clearer, more immediate, more expansive – communication of the Word of God. At least in the temporal economy, the prophets and apostles will not be superseded, as if they were merely stages on the way to a more comprehensive revelation. After inspiration there comes, not more inspiration, but hearing, receiving, contemplation of the Word which *has been* uttered; what comes next is *lectio*.[111]

The implications of this statement are: (i) the Word of God is now received subjectively by human beings through Scripture alone. This is effectively a restatement of the principle of *sola Scriptura*; (ii) viewed from another perspective, we may say that the texts of Holy Scripture are precisely the settled means that the

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108. On this point, Webster still stands with Barth against the tradition. This is why Fred Sanders' conclusion, that Webster became "increasingly comfortable with a doctrine of Scripture that had drastically more conservative lines than the regime of modern theology has normally allowed for," while true up to a point, must not be allowed to over-reach itself. (Sanders, "John Webster's Trinitarian Doctrine of Scripture," 19.) Precisely because Scripture is *not* revelation in any undifferentiated sense, Webster cannot be said to have retrieved "the distinctly recognizable Protestant orthodox doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture," "in *all* its glory and shame." (Ibid., 20. Emphasis added)

109. Webster, *DoW*, 17.

110. Ibid.

111. Ibid.

Word of God uses as instruments of his redemptive eloquence in the current dispensation.

5.3 Rejected/Modified Models

5.3.1 Accommodation

In chapter three above, it was argued that John Webster "requires" some sort of principle of accommodation or condescension in order to render theologically possible the notion that revelation is both the immediate, saving presence of God, and at the same time the historically-unfolding, creaturely-conditioned way by which God gives himself to be known. It was further suggested that for Webster, revelation considered *simpliciter dicta* (absolutely) is not accommodated, but that revelation considered *secundum quid* (relationally, as mediated through Scripture) is – and must be – accommodated.

However, Webster was not always amenable to employing the concept of accommodation. In his *Dogmatic Sketch*, Webster acknowledges "a long tradition of Protestant dogmatics [that] appealed to the notion of the divine act of accommodation or condescension in the use of human language and texts for the communication of divine verities."[112] But Webster remains at best cautious about the idea. There is, Webster thinks, a certain value in the concept, for it "give[s] proper emphasis to the way in which the biblical texts are what they are in the economy of God's self-revelation." However, the earlier Webster finds a problem with accommodation, particularly as it was employed in the hands of the Protestant scholastics. The problem is that the idea was "tied to an excessively neat distinction

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[112.] Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 22. Richard Muller offers a helpful definition of *accommodatio*, in Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 19.

between, on the one hand, the form, manner or mode of revelation, and on the other hand, the content of revelation." In other words, the "form" of Scripture is considered to be human, while its "content" is thought to be divine. Such a distinction ends up "inflaming the problem of dualism by reinforcing the idea that the creatureliness of the text is simply external and contingent."[113] Indeed, Muller's definition referenced above does suggest that the notion of accommodation tended to establish a form/content distinction in Protestant scholasticism. However, in response it may be countered that, as a careful reading of Junius has revealed, the scholastic use of *accommodatio* and related concepts was not so much predicated on a distinction between human form and divine content, as on a distinction between an infinite, archetypal revelation (by definition knowable only to God) and a finite, ectypal revelation, knowable by human beings. For a scholastic theologian like Junius, all that God ever reveals to creatures is, axiomatically, accommodated, in both form *and* content.

By the time of his essay, *Principles of Systematic Theology* (2009, reprinted in *DoW*), Webster was much more willing to invoke the concept of accommodation. Once again, a comparison with Junius is illuminating. As observed in chapter three above, Franciscus Junius offers an example of the typical Reformed approach to accommodation. Junius gives an account of archetypal theology in its ectypal refraction, suited to the capacities of pilgrims *in via*. Junius, we recall, differentiates between an internal and external concept of ectypal theology. It is in respect of the latter, relational and external form of ectypal theology that Junius applies the concept of accommodation.[114] The creatureliness of the text of Scripture is therefore,

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113. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 22.

114. See Junius, *Treatise*, 116. Junius writes:

> God is the originator and author of our theology, who graciously shares this with the human race and does so according to His own mode. And yet this is not by an equal mode; that is, it is not equal to the mode of His essence, which is infinite, but it is

for Junius, not "external and contingent" to the divine truth that is communicated: rather, that which is communicated from God to human beings must necessarily be in some sense accommodated, and the text of Scripture just *is* (an inscripturated aspect of) that accommodated word.

It is of prime importance to distinguish between the respective points at which Junius and Webster introduce the idea of accommodation. Somewhat like Junius, Webster can say that revelation's "accommodated form is Holy Scripture," and even that "[r]evelation is an act of accommodation."[115] But he reserves full application of the concept of accommodation until he comes to the creaturely "witnesses" to, (or "signs" for) revelation, especially Holy Scripture.[116] Whereas, for Junius, ectypal theology is *already* accommodated as soon as it takes its relational, external form, and so accommodation happens in some sense prior to human reception and verbalisation (and certainly prior to inscripturation), for Webster accommodation occurs *in* the historical act in which the divine Word "commissions" the human words of Scripture, or (more broadly speaking) in the divine use of creaturely forms, both "objectively" and "subjectively."[117] This means that Webster locates accommodation precisely at the point where God's knowledge is *received* in the human subject. For Webster, accommodation happens only as concrete human forms take place in history, specifically in both "Holy Scripture, *and, by derivation,* its reception and contemplation by the saints."[118] This is, of course, connected to Webster's distinctly "modern" view of the historical taking-form of revelation, and

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> done by an unequal mode, that is, according to the mode of His own will, accommodating His revelations [*temperantis ad commoditatem*] to what our condition can handle.

115. Webster, *DoW*, 138.

116. Ibid., 138, 59. Emphasis added. Sacramental witnesses would also be included here.

117. For the objective/subjective distinction, see ibid., 57-62.

118. Ibid., 138. Emphasis added.

his insistence on including the notion of subjective reception within the idea of revelation. In contrast, Junius discovers accommodation as a two-stage process, corresponding to the two concepts of ectypal theology. First, it is the act of God's (re-)knowing of himself in communicable terms, *prior to* the articulation of such knowledge in human words. Second, it is that communicated knowledge in the creaturely subject. So much hangs on these apparently nice distinctions! For Webster, just as for Junius, there is an analogical relationship between God's knowledge and ours, or "a fitting proportion between divine and created *scientia*."[119] This means that, by the grace of God, "diverse types of knowledge [divine and human] and knowing subjects [God and creatures] are brought into a fruitful, asymmetrical relation."[120] But for Junius, God establishes this proportion according to an eternal decision of his will, *before* it is concretised in human concepts and words, or creaturely intelligence.

Despite his agreement with John Webster that revelation unfolds historically, and his acknowledgment of revelation's subjective aspect, Herman Bavinck is closer to Junius and the Reformed tradition than Webster at this point. As James Eglinton has argued, Bavinck "regards all revelation as anthropomorphic."[121] For the Dutch theologian, there is thus always "a degree of (non-absolute) distance between God and his self-revelation." This means that "[a]ll that God reveals shows what he is *like*, rather than what he *is*."[122] Nature, history, humanity, and Scripture are all of a piece in this respect.

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119. Ibid., 140.

120. Ibid., 139.

121. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 106. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 99-100.

122. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 106.

The implications of the respective positions outlined above for a doctrine of Scripture are profound.[123] On Webster's construal, Scripture *cannot* be, in any simple sense, the Word of God, for "God is in himself the antecedent, majestic divine Word."[124] Any accommodated word is, *ipso facto*, a human word, and thus can only ever bear witness to the divine Word, to which it is at best "proportional." Following Junius or Bavinck, however, the divine word in its directedness to creatures is truly, albeit analogically, communicative of God, and to that extent it may be called the *divine* word, without compromising its humanity.[125] Bavinck adds to Junius the nuance of revelation's taking historical form, but he takes nothing away from Junius'

123. The table presented in chapter three above of the later Webster's view of revelation may be extended along these lines:

God's perfection (self-preservation) or archetypal theology.	God's essence, necessary, **incommunicable** and **immediate**. The ground of God's presence.
God's presence (self-presentation) or ectypal theology = God's reiteration of his perfect being in revelation.	God in historical, saving, covenant fellowship with creatures, communicating God's perfection in history by a contingent act of grace, **communicable** and **communicated**, having both an **immediate** and a **mediate** aspect.
Witnesses to revelation (still a form of ectypal theology)	Revelation in its **accommodated**, **mediated** form (especially Holy Scripture).
The theology of regenerate, rational creatures (still a form of ectypal theology)	Reason's internalisation and systematisation of **accommodated** revelation, as attested by its witnesses.

124. Webster, *DoW*, 119.

125. On the truthfulness and trustworthiness of analogical knowledge of God, grounded in the relationship between archetypal and ectypal theology, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:110. Bavinck makes clear his view that accommodation is "given with creation, that is, with the existence of finite being." (Ibid.)

commitment to accommodation as a necessary concomitant of all revelation *per se*. On this basis, the accommodated words of Holy Scripture *can be* the words of God or revelation, for they reflect the accommodation of ectypal theology that God himself has already begun to effect in its external form: indeed, to the extent that such words are θεόπνευστος, they *must* be God's words.[126]

Does Scripture really mediate God to us? Again, Webster's answer is subtly different from that of Junius or Bavinck. For Webster, on the one hand, in the divine-human encounter that Scripture serves, revelation itself (*him*-self?) accosts its human recipient, but this is always in and through the human words of Scripture, which are irreducible in their salvific functionality.[127] This gives rise to what Webster

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126. This point is corroborated by the way that Bavinck links the concepts of the theological *principia* with Junius' archetypal/ectypal distinction: the three *principia*

> are one in the respect that they have God as author and have as their content one identical knowledge of God. The archetypal knowledge of God in the divine consciousness; the ectypal knowledge of God granted in revelation and recorded in Holy Scripture; and the knowledge of God in the subject, insofar as it proceeds from revelation and enters into the human consciousness, are all three of them from God.

Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:213-14. See also the discussion in van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust*, 244.

127. East expresses Webster's view by means of an interesting metaphor:

> [I]f the mother is God, then Scripture is the milk on which the infant depends (itself a biblical image), and apart from which it can neither live nor grow into maturity. Nor can that which enlivens and sustains the infant be abstracted, even theoretically, from the one who gives it to him; they are inseparable, and alike necessary for the child. There is not one without the other, nor is there more 'direct' or 'immediate' nourishment available, as if the mother might simply will that the infant be fed: the milk *just is* the means by which the mother feeds, nourishes, and nurtures her child. (East, "The Church's Book," 176. Emphasis added.)

This metaphor reaches towards the formula proposed in this thesis for understanding Webster's view of revelation: revelation understood *simpliciter dicta* (in East's analogy, the mother) is always immediate, but revelation *secundum quid* (received by milk) is also always mediated. The metaphor reminds us that any talk of an encounter with revelation *itself* cannot – from the human point of view – mean surpassing or going beyond Scripture.

Of course, the metaphor breaks down if pressed, as an infant can live on formula milk, but human beings only "by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt 4:4)

calls the "pathos of singularity" attached to the particular words of Scripture in their sufficiency.[128] The revealed God completes the revelatory process by means of the conversion of created intellect so that sin may be overcome and God may be contemplated in his inner divine plenitude. For Junius and Bavinck, on the other hand, God speaks the words of Scripture to their human recipients, to give them (analogically) true – and saving – knowledge of God. As for the later Webster, revelation is brought to its *terminus* in the operation of theology's subjective cognitive principle, as the Holy Spirit regenerates and illuminates sinners. But, while for Webster this last spiritual work is a *necessary* part of revelation, for Bavinck, it is only *contingently* so.

5.3.2 Hypostatic Union

Webster consistently rejects the model of the hypostatic union for explaining the relationship between the divine and the human in the ontology of Scripture. Briefly stated, a model that accounts for the relationship between the divine Word and the human words of Scripture along the lines of hypostatic union posits an analogous relation between the incarnation of the Son of God and the inscripturation of the Bible. Such an incarnational analogy has been widely employed by Reformed theologians. For example, both Bavinck and Barth made use of it.[129]

In his *Dogmatic Sketch,* Webster criticises the application of the analogy of the hypostatic union to Scripture, for two main reasons: (1) the uniqueness of the incarnation, and (2) the danger of "divinising the Bible."[130] Above all, he insists that

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128. Webster, *DoW*, 18.

129. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:380, 434; Barth, *CD*, I.1, 501.

130. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 22.

"no divine nature or properties are to be predicated of Scripture."[131] Breaking the argument into its constituent parts, Webster contends, in respect of (1), that (a) the analogy compromises the uniqueness of the incarnation, and that (b) incarnation and inscripturation cannot be considered as equivalent.[132] In respect of (2), he argues that (a) the analogy necessarily makes an ontological claim about the Bible, (b) no divine properties can be predicated of a creaturely entity, and (c) no divine properties can be predicated of anything that stands in an instrumental relation to God.[133] A third aspect of the argument is that, (3) like the notion of "accommodation," the analogy tends to "drift into dualism."[134] This is a function of

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131. Ibid., 23. In support of his argument against the incarnational analogy, Webster cites G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, "(Mis)reading the Face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Theological Studies* 60, no. 3 (1999). Ayres and Fowl do say early on in their essay that in respect of Scripture the "christological parallel is logically incoherent," but this is not intended to be a blanket condemnation of any use of the analogy with the hypostatic union. Rather, Ayres and Fowl are concerned specifically to critique the application of the analogy in a particular document (The Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*). They say, however, that "several analogies *can* be drawn from Christ's two natures to various claims about scriptural interpretation." (Ibid., 522. Emphasis added.) Indeed, the latter part of their essay is concerned to *defend* a certain parallel "between the way that God teaches in and through the full humanity of Christ, and the way that God teaches in and through the words of the fully human authors of Scripture." (Ibid., 523) Following Gregory of Nyssa and John Scotus Eriugena, they argue for an intrinsic parallel or analogy by which "the Scriptures are providentially ordained to teach *as* God taught through Christ." (Ibid., 527. Emphasis original.) Their conclusion seems to confound Webster at this point, to the extent that we may wonder why he cited their article in the first place: "we *do* want to assert that Scripture has two natures, and we think that this position has *important theological consequences*." (Ibid., 528. Emphasis added.)

132. A similarly-structured analysis of Webster's arguments is found in Pass, "'The Heart of Dogmatics': The Place and Purpose of Christology in the Theological Method of Herman Bavinck," 129-30.

133. Webster's argumentation here is followed precisely in Michael F. Bird, "Inerrancy is Not Necessary for Evangelicalism Outside the USA," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, eds. James R. A. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 125. Bird is citing Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 22.

134. Ibid., 26.

its "reinforcing the idea that the creatureliness of the text is simply external and contingent."[135]

Writing in 2012, Webster again explicitly rejects the use of the incarnational analogy in respect of Scripture, despite the analogy's acknowledged "long pedigree."[136] His reasoning is as follows. His major premise (not stated explicitly, but assumed in the argument) is that divine attributes can be ascribed only to that which shares in essential union with God (along the lines of argument 2 (b) and (c) above). His minor premise – similar to argument (1) above – is that the incarnation is unique: "Scripture does not have a divine nature; the scriptural text is not substantially united to the divine Word; there is no *unio personalis* in inspiration." The conclusion is therefore that "there can be no communication of divine properties to the Bible." Webster's minor premise, at least as it is formulated here, is surely beyond dispute. Recent theologians who employ the incarnational analogy in their doctrines of Scripture, such as Telford Work, make no attempt to argue for a univocal "hypostatic union" in respect of the Bible.[137] Indeed, it is precisely the *analogical* nature of the analogy that ought to guard against the danger Webster anticipates. This is only to say that the analogy must be stated in such a way as to guard against the potential abuses Webster fears. Michael Allen, for example, stands with Donald A. Carson in his view that Webster has unjustifiably rejected the incarnational analogy, "rightly chastened," as Allen puts it.[138]

Lane Tipton reinforces this point:

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135. Ibid., 22.

136. Webster, *DoW*, 13. The following citations in the paragraph above are also found in *DoW*, 13.

137. See Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 98.

138. Allen, "Toward Theological Theology," 226n.

> [T]here certainly can be no identity regarding the relationship between the divine and human in the incarnation of Christ, on the one hand, and the divine and human in the inspiration of Scripture, on the other hand. Any analogy we suggest will need to be clearly articulated, carefully qualified, and presented in a way that avoids ambiguity and misunderstanding. In other words, the incarnational analogy is something that needs careful – even painstaking – theological articulation and is therefore not to be introduced or applied in a popular or loose way. The issues are too complex and far too important for such a treatment.[139]

A century ago, B. B. Warfield sanctioned the invocation of the incarnational analogy on the condition that its "remote" character should be maintained:

> It has been customary among a certain school of writers to speak of the Scriptures, because thus "inspired," as a Divine-human book, and to appeal to the analogy of Our Lord's Divine-human personality to explain their peculiar qualities as such [...] But the analogy with Our Lord's Divine-human personality may easily be pressed beyond reason. There is no hypostatic union between the Divine and human in Scripture; we cannot parallel the "inscripturation" of the Holy Spirit and the incarnation of the Son of God. The Scriptures are merely the product of Divine and human forces working together to produce a product in the production of which the human forces work under the initiation and prevalent direction of the Divine [...]. Between such diverse things there can exist only a remote analogy; and, in point of fact, the analogy in the present instance amounts to no more than that in both cases Divine and human factors are involved, though very differently.[140]

Even granting Webster's minor premise that the incarnation is unique, however, the detail of his argument is less convincing. The consequences that supposedly follow from employing the incarnational analogy (namely, that [a] the analogy compromises the uniqueness of the incarnation, and that [b] incarnation and inscripturation cannot be considered as equivalent) are demonstrably not in fact

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139. Lane G. Tipton, "Incarnation, Inspiration, and Pneumatology: A Reformed Incarnational Analogy," *Ordained Servant Online* (2008): accessed 21 September 2018, http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=109.

140. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948), 162.

necessary consequences, given the limitations typically placed on the analogy by those who use it. Furthermore, the very fact the hypostatic union model is employed *analogically* ensures that there is no univocity intended when speaking about incarnation and inscripturation as analogous phenomena.

It may be helpful at this point to define in exactly what sense this analogical relationship inheres. In John R. Betz's introduction to Pryzywara's use of the *analogia entis*, he offers a helpful taxonomy of analogies, in the tradition coming down from Aristotle via Aquinas and other medieval commentators on Aristotle. Aquinas distinguishes two ways of analogy: one by which two things are related to a third (a so-called *pros hen* analogy, known since Cajetan as an analogy of *attribution*: such analogies may be further sub-divided according to whether the attribution is *extrinsic* or *intrinsic*), and another by which two things are proportionally similar to two other things (Cajetan called this an analogy of *proportionality*).[141]

By way of example, to speak of "living theology" is to make an *extrinsic* analogy of attribution. "Life" (or the quality of being alive) is attributed extrinsically to "theology" because the latter is not in itself, strictly speaking, "living." To speak of "true theology" is to make an *intrinsic* analogy of attribution. As Betz notes, "if it is God who causes these perfections in creatures, and if, as for Aquinas and the medievals in general, effects in some way resemble their causes, according to the principle *omne agnes agit sibi simile*, then it is clear that, while these concepts refer primarily to God, they also refer to something, however deficient, intrinsic to creatures themselves."[142] "Truth" is a perfection of God which – arguably at least –

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141. John R. Betz, "After Barth: A New Introduction to Erich Przywara's *Analogia Entis*," in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, eds. Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 47-48.

142. Ibid., 47n.

may be attributed analogically to "theology."[143] The analogy of the hypostatic union, on the other hand, is an example of *analogia proportionalitatis*. This kind of analogy "clearly comports with metaphor and, as such, could be said to indicate a greater dissimilarity between the things compared."[144] What is of fundamental importance is that the analogy, like all analogies, "point[s] to a kind of middle ground between univocity and equivocity."[145] Understood on this basis, an incarnational analogy for the relationship between the divine Word and the human words of the Bible need not lead to the consequences Webster fears.

Webster's major premise is also problematic. Is it really the case that we may only ascribe divine attributes to that which participates in ontological union with God? The answer to that question depends on what we think "ascription" means, and how we understand "attributes." Webster thinks that commitment to the incarnational analogy leads to "attributing to the Bible what are in fact properly non-communicable divine attributes," such as infallibility.[146] His view may be questioned on two levels. First, infallibility need not always be construed as an incommunicable divine attribute. Of course, to say that it is such is to beg the question, as an incommunicable attribute by definition cannot be communicated! But when infallibility is attributed not personally but at the level of particular utterances, it is meaningful to speak of it as a communicable divine attribute.[147] A (human) person

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143. "Arguably," because Webster is unwilling to predicate certain divine attributes in respect of creaturely realities like "theology." But the point being illustrated here does not ultimately depend on taking a position in that argument.

144. Ibid., 48.

145. Ibid.

146. Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology," 74.

147. Donald Macleod has argued that the traditional distinction between incommunicable and communicable attributes is not sustainable. See Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1995), 20-21. Even without conceding Macleod's argument, the point being made here stands.

may say, for instance, "My name is John," and, if his name is indeed John, he has thereby uttered an infallible statement. Conversely, as Kevin Vanhoozer correctly observes, neither "weakness," nor even "humanity" need imply either fallibility or actual failure.[148] Crucially, there is no necessary contradiction engendered by the adjectival designation "infallible human."

Second, Webster's criticism of such attribution seems to be based on an over-circumscribed understanding of what it might mean to speak of Scripture as "divine": the *genus maiesticum* is not the only conceptual apparatus available to the theologian. "Divinity" – just like "humanity" – may be predicated of an entity (or attributed to an entity) in two ways. Predication works like this: first, personally, or essentially, as in "John is human," or "Jesus is divine"; and second, energetically, as in "This rock formation is human" (*i.e.* man-made) or "The miracle was divine" (*i.e.* according to divine agency). Attribution works in a similar way: "the human Jesus" or "the divine Jesus" (essential), compares with "human effort" or "divine providence" (energetic). The inconsistency to be noted here is that Webster is content to predicate of (and attribute to) the Bible *humanity*. When he does so, it is clearly meant in an energetic sense. He does not of course mean that the Bible is *essentially* human, or that it is in some sense a human being, sharing in the essence of what it is to be human. In an analogous way, surely it is at least theoretically possible to predicate divinity of a text or to attribute divinity (and therefore, by definition, divine attributes) to the Bible in this energetic sense, without compromising the uniqueness of God, or attributing essential deity to the Bible. To repeat, if a work or product of a human being may be said to be "human," and thereby to bear human attributes, it would seem to follow logically that a work of

148. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 157n.

God may be said to be (energetically) "divine," and thereby to bear divine attributes in that sense.[149]

Webster does say that "the text [of Scripture] itself" is "divine speech and address": "the Bible as a whole is [...] the *viva vox Dei*."[150] This means that "the text has authority."[151] But, crucially, it is not the text *in and of itself* (considered as a static entity) that has authority: "The 'authority' of the Bible is not some textual quality *per se*, somehow inherent in this collection of pieces of inscribed discourse."[152] Webster will not let us forget that the authority of Scripture inheres in the *event* in which God's address "accosts" the reader (or hearer), in "the *bouleversement* [violent disturbance] which God's Word effects."[153] The text has

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149. It seems clear that when Francis Turretin, for example, unashamedly (and repeatedly) asserts that Scripture is "divine" (*divina*), he means it in this energetic sense, since he seeks to demonstrate this on the basis of Scripture's *origin* (from God), not its *ontology*. See Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:62. It is true that Turretin does speak of Scripture having *esse divinam* in Question 6, III, but his more recent translator rightly renders the sense of this in English as "divine quality." See Francis Turretin, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, ed. and trans. John W. Beardslee (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

On the distinction between divine essence and divine energies, and its particular usefulness for articulating a doctrine of Scripture, see Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 129-32. Webster himself does not frequently invoke this distinction, but he comes close in his discussion of König's *Theologia Positiva Acroamatica* (1664), which, according to Webster, "moves from the divine quiddity [*i.e.* essence] to the divine energies." See Webster, *GWM*, 1:5. However, this distinction is not quite the same as its use in Horton. That which König speaks of as "*quae ad ἐνέργειαν referuntur*" remains a description of *God*, in those attributes or properties which are communicated to creatures.

A similar sort of distinction to that intended by Horton in different terms (between the divine being, and a divine work) is made in Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 146-47, 153.

150. Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology," 74-75.

151. Ibid.

152. Ibid., 75.

153. Ibid.

authority only to the extent that it "mediates divine speech."[154] Likewise, Webster argues that the text of Scripture is "self-interpreting and perspicuous."[155] But again, such things are "only intelligible in the context of a portrayal of divine action, not as material conditions of the text."[156] These are not "material textual attribute[s]" but "spiritual event[s]."[157] To speak of a divine "product" is, for Webster, to domesticate Scripture, and reduce it to something that we may have "to hand."

Webster thinks that to claim divine properties for the words of Scripture is to "breach the barrier between uncreated and created."[158] Thus, while Webster rejects modernity's dualisms, he will not allow us to "abolish the proper 'dualities'."[159] But is Webster correct that the Creator/creature distinction is necessarily compromised by attributing divine properties to Scripture? This question will be addressed further in the next chapter.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored John Webster's developing understanding of the relationship between revelation and the words of Scripture. A recognition of the *mystery* inherent in the idea of the communication of the eternal God to finite creatures goes hand-in-hand with a commitment to the *mediacy* involved in any

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154. Ibid.

155. Ibid.

156. Ibid.

157. Ibid., 76.

158. Webster, *DoW*, 13.

159. Ibid. The citation is from Armin Wenz, *Das Wort Gottes – Gericht Und Rettung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 304. Webster further cites Wenz with approval: God's speech and action is always "alien, other, coming to the world from outside." (Ibid., 303.)

such communication. As Webster writes, "[t]he publication of divine revelation follows an ordered sequence, in which no stage is superfluous: *sermo divina* – *sermo humana* – *lectio* [...] Placed between the divine Word and the creaturely hearer, Scripture is [...] an instrument in the fellowship between the revelatory Word and its addressees."[160] Webster's dogmatic treatment of the concepts of providence, sanctification, and inspiration has enabled an assessment of how Webster articulates the precise relationship between the divine Word, and the words of the Bible. A comparison of how Webster applies the concept of accommodation in his later doctrine of Scripture has clarified his departure from at least some exponents of the Reformed tradition at this point. Finally, certain criticisms of Webster's reluctance to employ an incarnational analogy in respect of Holy Scripture have been registered. This analysis paves the way for the next (final) chapter, in which Webster's bibliology is further compared with a range of Reformed interlocutors, and some proposals are made for a potential way out of the residual dualisms that critics have identified in his theology of Scripture.

160. Webster, *DoW*, 24.

§ 6. Evaluation

6.1 Introduction

"There are now signs that, having languished on the edges of theology for some time, bibliology is returning to theological debate."[1] John Webster's assessment, penned in 2004, is surely even more apposite today.[2] In this final chapter, a summary evaluation of Webster's own contribution to that debate is offered. The chapter takes the form of a section of positive assessment, followed by a more critical interaction. This segues into a final, constructive, section in which suggestions are made as to how Webster's insights and achievements might be

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1. Webster, *CG*, 37n.

2. Specifically *theological* and *historical* (but theologically-engaged) monographs or edited volumes on the doctrine of Scripture which have been published in recent years include Paddison, *Scripture*; Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture*; Ben Fulford, *Divine Eloquence and Human Transformation: Rethinking Scripture and History Through Gregory of Nazianzus and Hans Frei* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2013); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016); Holcomb, *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*; John S. Feinberg, *Light in A Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018); D. A. Carson, *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2009). Additionally, a vast array of titles has been published since 2004 on hermeneutics and the theological interpretation of Scripture, some of which are deeply concerned with questions of Scripture's ontology and respond to, or draw on, Webster in different ways. See, for example, Kevin J. Vanhoozer *et al.*, eds. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Bowald, *Rendering the Word*; Richard R. Topping, *Revelation, Scripture and Church Theological Hermeneutic Thought of James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei* (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2007); Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*; Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*; Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011); Nelson, Sarisky, and Stratis, eds. *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster*; Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically*; Darren Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Account* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

incorporated into a doctrine of Scripture that addresses the legitimate concerns of some of his critics, including the present author.

6.2 Positive Assessment

As illustrated in chapter one, readers do not have to look very far to find effusive praise for John Webster's theology. This is not surprising, given the richness of its conceptual development, the classical beauty of its rhetorical construction, the devotional warmth of some of its densest analyses, and the uncanny ease with which it combines at turns almost imperious rigour with humility of tone.[3] As suggested in the opening chapter, some of these aspects of Webster's theology are reflections of the man himself. Besides matters of style and form, many of the positive *dogmatic* gains from John Webster's bibliology have been identified in the course of this thesis. This short section is not so much an attempt to expand the panegyric, however, as it is a summary of the most significant "achievements" associated with Webster's doctrine of Scripture. These may be reduced to three.

First, Webster's work has given new confidence to a generation of theologians who seek to account for Holy Scripture in the context of divine, self-revealing *action*. Such theological possibilities derived of course from Webster's larger project, the architectonics of which laid down *God in himself* as the starting-point for dogmatic reflection. Webster's doctrine of Scripture is thoroughly both theocentric and Christocentric. For some, this represented a liberation of sorts. In a

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3. Webster himself commended the "rhetoric of edification" as a suitable mode for theological writing. See John Webster, "Scripture, Reading and the Rhetoric of Theology in Hans Frei," in *Ten Year Commemoration to the Life of Hans Frei, 1922-1988*, ed. Giorgy Olegovich (New York: Semenenko Foundation, 1999), repr. as "Afterword: Hans Frei, Scripture, Reading, and the Rhetoric of Theology," in *Reading Faithfully*, eds. Mike Higton and Mark Alan Bowald, vol. 1, *Writings From the Archives: Theology and Hermeneutics* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 218.

collection of essays dedicated to John Webster *in memoriam* (representing the various contributions to the 2017 Los Angeles Theology Conference) Kevin Vanhoozer plays on Kant when he writes: "John Webster has roused many of us from our nondogmatic slumbers, awakening us to the bracing prospect of speaking of God in himself [...] as well as speaking of his external operations."[4] "This," he writes, "is heady stuff, for theology under the house arrest of modernity was not allowed to make claims that transcended human spatiotemporal experience."[5]

Second, related to the above, Webster's bibliology contributed to the growing *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* "movement."[6] We have seen above how this happened, and noted Webster's own hopes for, and concerns in respect of, TIS. Many hotly-debated questions surrounding TIS, including precisely what it is, and how it might develop, remain unanswered. But Webster's bibliology, alongside the work of other scholars who have supported TIS in different ways, has encouraged at least some systematicians and biblical scholars to share the fruits of their research, and to seek ways to work together. In particular, Webster's insistence that Scripture is a text *sui generis*, which cannot be rightly interpreted without reference to God, has had some impact on the work of biblical hermeneutics.[7]

Third, and finally, Webster's methodological commitment to theological *ressourcement* has helped to open doors in the world of contemporary Protestant

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4. Vanhoozer, "The Mission of Dogmatic Discourse," 28.

5. Ibid. Vanhoozer characterises Webster's dogmatics as, at once, analytic and poetic. (Ibid., 31-43.) Vanhoozer is, of course, aware that for Webster, "poetics" is frequently a pejorative. What Vanhoozer means by "poetics" concerns "the forms of language, experience, and thought that communicate" dogmatic content. (Ibid., 36.)

6. "Movement" is in inverted commas because the term is not ideal, despite its common usage, as noted in the introduction to this thesis.

7. Representative examples may be found in articles in Vanhoozer *et al.*, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible.*

theology (and beyond) to the critical-but-loving engagement with a whole range of authors from the broad-and-deep Christian tradition.[8] These include classical, medieval, Reformation and post-Reformation writers, as well as modern theologians. A recent example of such work in systematic theology is the project known as "Reformed Catholicity," pioneered by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain.[9] Of course, the doctrine of Scripture has been part of this re-appropriation.[10]

6.3 Critical Engagement: Identification of Problems, and Towards an Organic Solution

Given that Webster's own litmus test for the adequacy of his doctrine of Scripture was its ability to find a non-dualistic way between "naturalism" and "supernaturalism," this test must of course be part of any evaluation. The argument to be developed here is that Webster was partly, but not wholly, successful in this regard. This section has three parts, each of which draws on the material of the previous chapters to advance some problems in Webster's bibliology. In the first part, Webster is brought into conversation with certain other Reformed theologians who take a different view of the relationship between revelation and Holy Scripture.

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8. See, for example, the recent collection of essays: Darren Sarisky, ed. *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017). One of Webster's own essays (""Love is Also A Lover of Life": *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness") is reprinted in this volume.

9. See the programmatic suggestions in Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Ada: Baker, 2015). Also, note the "worked examples" in their subsequent publication: Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, eds., *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2016). For a further recent example of Protestant *ressourcement*, this time in the field of biblical interpretation (and so evincing some overlap with the previous point about TIS) see Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2018).

10. An example is Vanhoozer's chapter on "Holy Scripture" in Allen and Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*.

It is argued here that the lack of a doctrine of general revelation in Webster's theology is an important factor contributing to his reluctance to describe Holy Scripture as "revelation." In the second part, Webster's understanding of language itself is examined, in conversation with some recent Reformed work on linguistics and epistemology. It is argued that residual dualisms in Webster's thinking might be overcome by means of an organic understanding of the relationship between God, God's world, and God's words.[11] In the third part, Webster's equation of revelation with reconciliation is questioned.

6.3.1 No Place for General Revelation?

As exemplified in the previous chapter, it is instructive to compare Webster's understanding of revelation (and the relationship of Holy Scripture to that revelation) with other modern theologians who share many of his basic commitments, but disagree with him at certain points. The key question in this regard is whether it is in any sense appropriate to *identify* Scripture with revelation, or, expressed differently, whether there is some kind of overlap between the divine Word/words and the words of Scripture. Developing the arguments of chapter five above, Webster will be compared with that stream of the Reformed theological tradition represented by, on the one hand, Geerhardus Vos in North America, and

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11. This chapter takes an eclectic approach to potential criticisms of Webster's doctrine of Scripture. There is no specific treatment of, for example, the criticisms of Gavin D'Costa in respect of Webster's neglect of the category of "tradition." These criticisms may be found in D'Costa, "Book Review: *Dogmatic Sketch*." Non-inclusion here is not because D'Costa's criticisms are unimportant. Rather, they are one step removed from the path followed by this particular thesis. Readers will be aware that certain other critical interactions with Webster and his ideas (such as those of Angus Paddison and, indirectly, John Barton) have already taken up significant space in the chapters above. In general, the rule is that where the stance in this thesis is that Webster may be (broadly) defended against his critics, those criticisms have been addressed in earlier chapters. Here, the aim is to focus attention on criticisms that to a greater or lesser degree, it will be argued, stick.

on the other hand, Herman Bavinck in the Netherlands.[12] Later on, Cornelius Van Til will appear as a further interlocutor.[13]

To rehearse some basic elements of the underlying shared paradigm, each of these Reformed theologians conceives of a relationship between God and his creation such that God, who is wholly perfect and complete *in se*, nevertheless freely wills to create a universe *ex nihilo*. This results in a relationship between God and his works so that the former is understood to be the basis or ground of the latter, and the latter in some way reiterates or re-presents the former. Here are the ontological foundations of the epistemological idea – common to Webster, Vos, and Bavinck – that God reveals himself by natural and historical means. Gaffin traces the genesis of this idea to Vos, who was, "the first in the Reformed tradition, perhaps even the first orthodox theologian, to give pointed, systematic attention to the *doctrinal* or *positive* theological significance of the fact that redemptive revelation comes as an organically unfolding historical process."[14] But despite broad agreement up to this point, there are important differences between Webster and these other theologians.

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12. Substantial reference will also be made to works by John Murray and Richard B. Gaffin. Vos, Murray, and Gaffin are considered together because Murray and Gaffin are explicitly derivative of Vos, and have a self-understanding of developing, explicating, and defending the latter's insights. There was, of course, significant overlap between the work of Vos and Bavinck, although they represent discernible positions, not least because they worked in different contexts and linguistic milieux.

13. Webster never engaged explicitly with Van Til. Indeed, Van Til's 1962 work on Barth is not even mentioned by Webster in his review of the secondary literature on Barth in Webster, *Barth*, xii-xiv. Van Til's inclusion here is justified by the similiarities of his theology to that of the later Webster (to be detailed below), which similarities point up the differences, where they exist, with particular clarity. For Van Til on Barth, see Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962).

14. Gaffin, "Introduction," xv. Emphasis original. Gaffin nevertheless recognises that there was awareness of the "historical character of revelation" before Vos in the Reformed tradition, *e.g*. Cocceius and Edwards. (Ibid.)

For Murray, following Vos, all creation is impressed with the "imprint of God's glory."[15] All visible realities thus disclose the invisible God. For Bavinck, similarly, everything that *is*, reveals, and so all creation is divine self-revelation, at least when considered *sub specie aeternitatis*.[16] As James Eglinton notes, this means that for Bavinck the whole created universe "analogically conveys God's nature."[17] We have seen that, for the later Webster, a similar sort of relationship between God and creation is understood. God reveals himself in his works. The economy reflects God's essence. In principle, creation (nature) and history may therefore be interpreted as an unfolding of the divine being in time and space.[18] Webster says that there is "a *depth* to created things," according to which they point beyond themselves to their ultimate cause in God.[19] He also observes – like Bavinck and

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15. John Murray, "Systematic Theology," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 25, no. 1 (1963), 133. Exegetically, Murray derives this idea from Ps. 19:1, 97:6, and Rom. 1:20. There are echoes here of Calvin's concept of the *theatrum gloriae Dei*, found, for example, in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.5.8. Karl Barth picks up on this language, but as John Macken (following Hendrikus Berkhof) notes, his meaning is quite different from Calvin's. For Calvin, "the created world in its awesome majesty is the living expression of the presence of God in nature and history," so that "the world itself [...] is the self-manifesting action of God." For Barth, on the other hand, the world is "merely [...] the backdrop against which the real action takes place." See John Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the Church Dogmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 70-71.

Webster himself writes in a late essay that "[w]e may speak of the economy as the theatre in which God's Word is heard, in which God is communicatively and intelligibly present." (Webster, *DoW*, 118.) Significantly, for Webster it is the "fellowship-creating, redemptive and revelatory" *economy* that is the theatre. (Ibid.)

16. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:340-41.

17. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 153.

18. Webster never, of course, suggests that the divine being is either constituted or compromised in any respect by such an unfolding. He always maintains the Creator/creature distinction, and is at pains in his later work to insist that the relation between God and his creatures from the divine side is *rational*, but not *real*.

19. Webster, *GWM*, 1:107.

Vos – that God communicates his likeness to his (human) creatures.[20] But here is the difference: Webster effectively limits this revelatory unfolding to the economy of *grace*. What is missing in Webster is any explicit account of "general" or "natural" revelation.[21] Likewise, Webster gives no indication that he works with a category of "common grace."[22] Indeed, the very danger that Webster is concerned to avoid is that we might "historicise or naturalise God's personal revelatory activity, reducing it to an intra-mundane phenomenon – a danger which [...] has afflicted much Christian theological talk about the nature of Holy Scripture."[23] A human being may

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20. Ibid., 1:111.

21. Both the particular language of "general" or "natural" revelation, and the underlying idea, are entirely absent from Webster's essay collections *DoW* and *GWM*, and there is no sustained discussion of the theme in his earlier works either. On the contrary, in his discussion of Barth, Webster registers Barth's distinction between the claims that "revelation is historical" (which Barth accepts) and that "history is revelation" (which Barth flatly denies, on the grounds that history – in general terms – is not necessarily related to the Word of God). See Webster, *DoW*, 83. Webster is not explicit here, but it would seem that he sympathises with Barth at this point. The lack of a positive statement of a doctrine of general revelation anywhere in his *oeuvre* would seem to confirm this view.

For a classic Reformed orthodox statement of the doctrine of general or natural revelation, see Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:5. Turretin also speaks of "natural theology." (Ibid., 1:6-16.) For Turretin, "[t]he orthodox [...] uniformly teach that there is a natural theology." (Ibid., 1:6.) In Turretin, God-given natural revelation (partly implanted and partly apprehended discursively) gives rise to a natural theology in the human subject, which is likewise parly innate and partly acquired.

22. Common grace and general revelation are closely linked concepts in the Reformed tradition, even when the terminology of "common grace" is not employed, as, for example in Turretin. (See ibid., 1:10.) Interestingly, in one of his later essays Webster does introduce a category that he calls "pagan virtue." Webster sees this species of virtue as "enfolded within the history of divine judgement and renewal of creaturely life." He writes that "even in its damaged state and resistance to the end to which it was appointed, natural human life contains anticipations of its conversion, *common graces* which, however haltingly, stretch out to its completeness." Such "common graces" are not, however, to be confused with the concept of "common grace" as it is deployed by, for example, Abraham Kuyper. See Webster, "Intellectual Patience," in *GWM*, 2:182. Emphasis added.

23. Webster, *Dogmatic Sketch*, 15. We shall return to the question of whether Vos and Bavinck are guilty of this particular charge.

touch the world, and can of course experience (and even shape) history directly as a participant in it: yet to conceive any of this as *revelatory* is, for Webster, to transgress a red line. It is not, therefore, "all" of nature and history that reveals God. Rather, for Webster, it is the *historia salutis*, and, in terms of particular import for this thesis, the *historia scripturae*, that is the locus of divine self-revelation.[24] The significance of this move will become apparent below.

Returning to the concept of revelation in Vos *et al*, Gaffin makes explicit both the *distinction*, and the *relationship*, between general and special revelation. These are "distinct," but God's special revelation is "always within the context of his self-revelation in creation [nature] and history."[25] Bavinck expresses the relationship such that "special revelation is *akin to* general revelation."[26] They are of the same *genus*. Special revelation, like general revelation, is historical, "an organically unfolding whole."[27] Unlike general revelation, special revelation may be discerned according to two "modes": *deed* and *word*, which Gaffin further specifies as "redemptive deed" (or just "redemption") and "revelatory word" (verbal revelation).[28] The relationship between these two is such that "[t]he history of (verbal) revelation may be viewed as *a stream within and conforming to the contours of* the history of redemption."[29] Gaffin does not equate revelation with

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24. Webster, *DoW*, 14. Of course, neither Bavinck nor Vos denies this, as far as it goes, and particularly as far as it applies to "special" revelation. It is the application to general revelation that is the point of contention.

25. Richard B. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical View," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, eds. Stanley E. Porter Jr. and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 91.

26. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:344.

27. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical View," 91. See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:343.

28. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical View," 91.

29. Ibid., 92. Emphasis added. For Murray, "the pattern [of special revelation] found in the

redemption, but neither will he allow that they be cast asunder. He cites Vos: "Revelation is so interwoven with redemption that, unless allowed to consider the latter, it would be suspended in air."[30] Verbal revelation is thus "derivative" of divine redemptive and revelatory acts, but at the same time, its purview extends *beyond* or *behind* those acts because its referent is not just historical, but *transcendent*, pointing "beyond history to [God's] antecedent self-existence (aseity) in its ultimate incomprehensibility and the ultimate impenetrability of his all-controlling pretemporal purpose."[31]

Some of this sounds very similar to the concerns of the later Webster to trace the depth of created realities back to their cause and genesis in the essential God. But Gaffin expresses the crucial point of difference with Webster: "*Scripture is itself revelation, not somehow less than revelation.*"[32] For Gaffin, it is not wrong to characterise Scripture as, in a certain sense, a "witness" to revelation.[33] But this is not sufficient. Rather, Scripture is an "integral part" of "the actual history of redemption."[34] Or, in Murray's words, "[s]pecial revelation as deposited in Scripture [...] is itself [...] an abiding and for us indispensable organ in the fulfilment of God's

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Scripture reflects the pattern followed in the history of revelation as a whole." See John Murray, "Systematic Theology (Second Article)," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 26, no. 2 (1963), 42.

30. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical View," 93. The citation is from Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, 15.

31. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical View," 92. Michael Horton adds a further nuance, pointing out that "God's speech does not merely *interpret* history; it *creates* it." See Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 123. Emphasis added.

32. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical View," 93.

33. Murray expresses the same point: "The point of difference [in this case, with Barth] is that the witness of Scripture *is* revelatory and that God speaks to us *in* the witness of Scripture and not merely *through* the witness of Scripture." See Murray, "Systematic Theology," 135.

34. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical View," 93.

redemptive will."[35] Holy Scripture is therefore "the principal source of revelation."[36] This is not to claim that Scripture somehow surpasses or displaces Jesus Christ as God's supreme revelation, but rather to insist that "we need more than the revelation which Christ is, and we can have no knowledge of, nor encounter with, the revelation that he is except through Scripture."[37] Scripture is characterised by these theologians as an organ within the organism that is the redemptive and revelatory, natural and historical, self-unfolding of God *in* and *for* the world.[38] To consider revelation without Scripture as an ingredient and inherent aspect of that revelation is thus equivalent to a theological evisceration. Removed from the organism, the organ ceases to function as designed, and as a result the organism itself is effectively compromised. The alleged compromise of revelation happens when the written word of Scripture is denied the qualities or properties that it possesses as a function of its identification with the divine word, such as infallibility and inerrancy.[39] For theologians such as Bavinck and Vos, this denial is inevitably to place unwarranted limits on the authority of Scripture as the Word of God to the church and the world,

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35. Murray, "Systematic Theology," 136.

36. Ibid., 134.

37. Ibid., 136.

38. Revelation – general and even special – is, in this sense, "intra mundane," but this is never understood to compromise its "energetic" divinity.

39. This is not the place to engage in debates about the meaning of these terms. They feature here as examples of properties that are attributed to Scripture by Bavinck and Vos, but not by Webster. Gaffin's reading of Bavinck on inerrancy has recently been challenged by Bruce Pass in Bruce R. Pass, "Upholding Sola Scriptura Today: Some Unturned Stones in Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of Inspiration," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 4 (2018). However, Pass concludes that Bavinck does hold to what Pass calls "well-versed inerrancy." (Ibid., 533.)
A longer list of "divine" attributes that are specifically attributed to the speech of God in Scripture includes righteousness, faithfulness, wonderfulness, uprightness, purity, truth, eternality, omnipotence, and perfection. See John Frame, *A Theology of Lordship*, vol. 4, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2010), 66.

and to subject it to human reason in such a way that it need not be accepted in its entirety as a trustworthy, divine message, bearing as much authority as God himself. As John Frame writes, "to say that [God] is more authoritative than his own words (i.e. more authoritative than himself) is nonsense."[40] How does Webster come to such a different conclusion from these other Reformed theologians? The answer is partly exegetical. Further, this exegesis is shaped, it will be argued, by underlying theological concerns and presuppositions.

It is notable that although both Webster and Gaffin spend considerable space on exegeting the exordium of the Epistle to the Hebrews, their exegesis yields opposing findings. Commenting on Hebrews 1:1 ("God spoke to our fathers by the prophets" [ESV]) Webster finds that this was "undoubtedly God's word, but an *indirect* word."[41] His reasoning is that the preposition ἐν is used here instrumentally, to mean that God spoke "through" the prophets. It is not grammatically impossible to construe ἐν in this way, although it is hard to find another biblical example of the preposition used in exactly this sense.[42] What is remarkable is that Gaffin also translates ἐν in Heb 1:1 as "through," and adds that "we *may* speak advisedly of the

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40. Ibid., 43. Of course, Webster does not say this, precisely because he does not think that the words of the Bible are, in any simple sense, *God's* words.

41. Webster, *GWM*, 1:64. Emphasis added.

42. BDAG limits the specifically *instrumental* uses of ἐν to two:

"ⓐ it can serve to introduce persons or things that accompany someone to secure an objective: 'along with';

ⓑ it can serve to express means or instrumentality in terms of location for a specific action."

Of these options, ⓐ seems more possible for Heb 1:1, although it is not precisely what Webster intends. Perhaps closer to Webster's suggestion is BDAG's further possible gloss for ἐν: "with the help of" as a marker of agency. See William Arndt *et al.*, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 328.

prophets as instruments."[43] However, Gaffin explicates this instrumentality in such a way that there remains an overlap between divine and human speaking (or authorship). His supporting exegesis draws on Hebrews 3:7 and 4:7, both of which verses feature a quotation from Psalm 95. As Gaffin correctly notes, in 4:7, God (the implied subject) is said to speak "through" (ἐν) David, while in 3:7, the same citation is attributed directly and unambiguously to the Holy Spirit, who "speaks" (λέγω) the identical words. Two further examples from the same epistle strengthen Gaffin's wider case. First, in 9:8, the Holy Spirit "reveals" (δηλόω) both word and deed. Second, in 10:15, the Spirit both "bears witness" (μαρτυρέω) to us in respect of, and "speaks" (εἶπον), the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31. The force of Gaffin's exegetical argument is that Scripture itself does not in fact draw clear lines between divine speaking and human speaking, between "deed" and "word" revelation, or between "witness" and direct "speech." It cannot therefore be established on the basis of Hebrews 1:1 that the prophetic word is "indirect," in the sense that Webster claims it is.[44] Tracing the exegetical data in this way more closely than Webster, Gaffin's argument suggests that Webster's position requires special (theological) pleading.[45]

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43. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical View," 96. Emphasis added.

44. Even if Webster is correct about the intended meaning of Heb 1:1, there are certain biblical *loci* that are difficult to fit into his understanding of the indirectness of the prophetic word. For example, Lane Tipton repeats Vern Poythress' interesting observation that, as far as we may tell from the biblical account, there is no human author of the Decalogue. It is a *direct*, *verbal* (and *inscripturated*) word from God. In its oral form, it comes from God's voice. In its written form, it comes from God's "finger." Poythress further argues that this model is paradigmatic in Scripture for divine communication, even when this is *to* and *through* God's prophets. See Tipton, "Incarnation, Inspiration, and Pneumatology: A Reformed Incarnational Analogy."

45. Scott Swain writes that "[a]lthough theologians continue to debate the exact nature of God's active relationship to this text, most Christians regard the Bible as the preeminent textual embodiment of divine self-communication. That is to say, they consider the Bible to be the Word of God." In Swain's view, this is a creedal commitment, based on the Nicene

Such special pleading is, it is argued here, a function of Webster's broader theological framework, according to which there is no explicit category of "general" revelation. For Bavinck and Vos *et al*, the world (nature and history) is revelatory, albeit that such revelation is insufficient for salvation, and subject to sinful obfuscation and repression. But, crucially, the world – and so, all natural and historical "creaturely realities" – are, inherently and thus potentially (if not in every case actually) *fitting* means of divine revelation. That is what they were created to be. In Murray's words, we live out our human existence "in a context which is filled with the manifestation of the glory of the same God who specially reveals himself to us in his Word."[46] "God," Murray writes, "reveals himself in *all* the works of his hand with which we men have any encounter."[47]

Webster resists this view of the world, and of God's relationship to it, probably on the basis of two concerns, namely, that he thinks: (1) human language cannot be intrinsically capable of revealing God, because revelation must be preserved as a fundamentally *gracious* concept; and, related to this, (2) understanding all nature and history as directly revelatory somehow compromises the being of God (or revelation), putting it into human hands, where it becomes open to the potential of abuse, or is at least stripped of its power to effect divine *bouleversement*, as a Word from "outside."[48]

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creed, which confesses (following Heb 1:1) the faith that the Holy Spirit "spoke by the prophets." What that *means* is of course the question. As Swain rightly suggests, our approach to the Bible must, and will, be determined by what we conceive the Bible to *be*. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 2-4.

46. Murray, "Systematic Theology," 134.

47. Ibid., 133. Emphasis added.

48. There is perhaps a third concern involved, which is Webster's fear that doctrines of general revelation can be misused/abused in apologetic exercises. His unwillingness to build bridges between theology and other disciplines, such as the natural sciences, has been noted in chapter one above.

In respect of the first of these, a robust account of general revelation in God's relation to his creation allows theologians to affirm the fittingness of all created realities, including human language, to reveal God. As Gaffin puts it, we can be

> confident that God is speaking through the text in the sense that the text is God himself speaking in a way that condescends to our creatureliness yet is commensurate with who he is as God, including his omniscience and truthfulness, and without that speaking being limited or rendered ineffective by the sinfulness and personal and cultural limitations of the human author involved.[49]

It may be observed in passing at this point that the later Webster's focus on the doctrine of creation and the integrity of creation as a manifestation of the unfolding of God's gracious being *prior to* the covenant of grace, *might have* opened up the conceptual space for him to follow Bavinck and Vos in an affirmation of general revelation. This would especially have been the case if Webster had aligned himself with Calvin and the post-Reformation scholastics at this point. Instead, Webster's position probably reflects the ongoing influence of Barth (and T. F. Torrance).[50]

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49. Richard B. Gaffin, "The Redemptive-Historical Response," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, eds. Stanley E. Porter Jr. and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 181. A detailed interaction with Gaffin's understanding of human and divine language in relationship to the being of God will be presented below.

50. In his study on general revelation, G. C. Berkouwer offers a fine summary of Barth's understanding of revelation. For Barth, revelation is personal. It is the revelation of God himself in his Son: "Jesus Christ is revelation, alone and exclusively." See G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 24. Berkouwer makes reference to Karl Barth, *CD*, I.2, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956).

Thus in revelation, "[w]e do not face a reality differentiated from God, but we face God himself." (Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, 26. Emphasis original.) Also, for Barth, this revelation is to be equated with reconciliation, as God reveals himself graciously in Jesus Christ. Since revelation, thus defined, is inseparable from the grace of God who reveals himself, Barth closes down any other possible avenue or means by which we might know God. This explains Barth's antipathy towards natural theology. For Barth, natural theology represents an attempt to know God's being apart from God's grace and mercy, and this constitutes an attack on the very unity of God. (Ibid., 27.)

Webster's position may indeed reveal the influence of Aquinas, also. Webster follows Calvin (and Barth) against Aquinas in his insistence on the absolute necessity of Scripture for true

Turning to the second of Webster's concerns – that understanding all nature and history as directly revelatory somehow compromises the being of God – it is important first to see *how* this concern arises. First, we may consider Webster's detailed interaction with Roman Catholic theologian Oliver Davies in *DoW*.[51] Davies' proposal is in many ways different from the Reformed theologians discussed in this thesis, but it shares with them certain emphases. For example, there is an argument that "divine and human speech (like creator and creation) are not to be segregated," but rather there is rather a "theophanic universe" that manifests "the coinherence of creation and revelation."[52] These are some of the ingredients of a doctrine of general revelation, in Reformed terms. In Davies' words,

> The presence of God within the creation, as one whose speaking is the origin of the creation, sets the parameters for a distinctively Christian understanding of language, world and sign. This is a model which proposes a double operation of divine language. In the first place divine speech is that which institutes the world. The world, of which we are a part, must therefore be constituted as a domain of signs whereby things created point to the divine creativity as the source of their existence [...] That which was spoken by God speaks the Creator, as a text bodies forth its author's voice.[53]

For several reasons, Webster explicitly rejects this paradigm. First, he thinks there is too much continuity between creator and creatures, so that "[r]evelation gravitates towards a doctrine of creation as effusion, and creation itself is permeable to the being of God."[54] Second, human reason is understood "in relation to a

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knowledge of God, but in his silence on the subject of general revelation he seems to stand closer to Thomas in at least one respect, namely the view that the creation of man according to the *imago Dei* does not necessarily mean that man knows God (*contra* Calvin).

51. Webster, *DoW*, 126-28. Webster is interacting with Oliver Davies, *The Creativity of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

52. Webster, *DoW*, 126. Reference to a "theophanic universe" is a citation of Davies.

53. Davies, *The Creativity of God*, 95. Cited in Webster, *DoW*, 127.

54. Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," in *DoW*, 127.

Christian semiotics of the participation of creaturely realities in divine self-communication."[55] The result, for Webster, is that "the divine Word is almost folded into that which it interpenetrates and which in turn participates in the divine Word as its sign."[56] In addition, Christ's redemptive work is lost sight of. We can discern from this discussion of Davies some reasons why Webster may have been leery of doctrines of general revelation. His concerns to maintain the creator/creature distinction, and to focus on revelation as a work of grace centred on Jesus Christ, are certainly relevant. Perhaps most importantly, there is the worry that, if God is thought somehow to speak in and through *everything*, then both the gospel and the divine being are potentially compromised.

Another related concern of Webster's on this score is reminiscent of Barth's complaint that Reformed dogmaticians standing in the confessional tradition treated revelation as "a capital sum standing at their disposal."[57] As John Frame explains, for Barth, "the orthodox think God's revelation (and therefore God himself!) is 'at their disposal,' so that they can 'possess,' 'control,' 'preserve,' 'manipulate,' 'depersonalize,' 'master' (etc.) the Word of God."[58] Webster, as we have seen, uses similar language to express his own concerns in this regard. But he is not only worried about so-called "fundamentalists": any doctrine of general revelation, and particularly the idea that *all* of nature and history *reveals*, threatens in Webster's eyes to effect a similar sort of God-dishonouring problem.

Is any of this necessarily so? First we may observe that, on a purely utilitarian level, Webster's view no more immunises sinful humans against the

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55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Barth, *CD*, I.1, 258.

58. See John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2015), 373.

tendency to try to place themselves "above" or "in control of" divine revelation than does the traditional view. As Webster himself recognises, this is a universal tendency since Adam's fall, and it has a moral and spiritual root. Of course, noetic fallenness is one aspect of hamartiology, and bad theology can be both a symptom and an aggravating cause of this sort of moral and spiritual failure. Nevertheless, Webster fails to demonstrate how his view particularly helps us at this point. Restricting Scripture's status to a "witness" to revelation may even have the opposite effect, if it "allows" sinful humans to relativise the words of the Bible.[59]

Second, it is here that the theological distinctions made by Junius and others in the Reformed tradition, and their development by Bavinck, Vos, and others, may usefully be invoked. God's being is not in fact necessarily compromised by an inscripturated deposit of revelation, because that revelation is not God's essence itself, but rather an accommodated, verbal representation of his being and his will, one necessary component of the variegated, naturally-and-historically-developed, divine self-presentation, at the centre of which is Jesus Christ. Viewed from another angle, to understand the Bible as an integral part of the revelation of God is not necessarily to divinise it. Divine deed and divine word, held together in organic unity, constitute special revelation, and this special revelation then becomes the lens through which God's general revelation in all nature and history may be apprehended. Once again, the distinction between God's *essence* and his *energies* may helpfully be deployed here. The organism is energetically divine. This view of revelation, in both its general and special manifestations, understood together as an organic unity-in-diversity, need not therefore compromise the being of God, or bring God down to be an object of human manipulation.

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59. This much is suggested by John Frame in ibid.

One Reformed theologian who shares many of Webster's broader concerns, but not his worries on this particular score, is Cornelius Van Til. Like the later Webster, Van Til begins his dogmatics with the "fundamental [...] presupposition of the antecedent self-existence of God."[60] Again, Van Til insists that "theology is primarily God-centered rather than Christ-centered."[61] The Creator-creature distinction is particularly important to Van Til, and he refers to it repeatedly throughout his work.[62] Furthermore, Van Til and Webster share a similar understanding of the relation between divine and human agency in the economy, forming similar criticisms of the modern paradigm at this point. In Van Til's words, "because of God's absolute self-consciousness, man's self-conscious activity is always derivative, and man's reconstructive activity operates in the field of God's original constructive activity."[63] Like Webster, Van Til argues that God's attributes can only be understood *sui generis*, and beginning with the Trinity.[64] Van Til even agrees with Webster that the inspiration of Scripture cannot become an epistemological foundation for all of Christian theology. He specifically challenges such an approach, and insists that revelation is and must be self-testifying: "only God himself can testify to the revelation that he has given of himself."[65]

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60. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2007), 15.

61. Ibid., 16.

62. See ibid., 28n5, 59n7, 64n16, 72, 76, 95n33, 132n43, 172n44, 201n29, 243n4, 279, 283, 296, 300, 360n33.

63. Ibid., 232. The phrase, "the field of God's original constructive activity" means here what Webster intends by the "domain of the Word," or the economy of grace.

64. See ibid., chapter 16.

65. Ibid., 242-43.

Where Van Til differs from Webster is in his particular construal of the analogical nature of human knowledge. Van Til writes,

> As man's existence is dependent upon an act of voluntary creation on the part of God, so man's knowledge depends upon an act of voluntary revelation of God to man. [So far, Webster would concur.] Even the voluntary creation of man is already a revelation of God to man. Thus every bit of knowledge on the part of man is derivative and reinterpretative. This is what we mean by saying that man's knowledge is analogical.[66]

For Van Til, "the whole created universe [is] a revelation of God."[67] Whereas, for John Webster, revelation is to be accounted for as (even equated with) reconciliation, for Van Til, in the first instance revelation is to be accounted for as (even equated with) creation, although Van Til does of course distinguish between this – general – revelation, and saving – special – revelation.[68]

It is important to note that Van Til, like Webster, recognises an aspect of mediation in his doctrine of Scripture. But, whereas for Webster, Scripture's mediateness is a function of its being textual and verbal (and thus human), for Van Til, *revelation* itself as Scripture is necessarily mediate, as a function of its being *historical*.[69] Even so, revelation's mediateness does not count against its infallibility,

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66. Ibid., 34.

67. Ibid., 119.

68. Ibid., 120-21.

69. Ibid., 224. Likewise, Michael Horton argues that on an analogical account of revelation (the history of which he traces from Thomas to its appropriation in Reformed orthodoxy by Junius and others) "[r]evelation is never immediate." Horton cites Gunton's criticism of Barth's proposal of "a form of revelational immediacy," not – of course – in his view of Scripture, but in his understanding of revelation as, properly speaking, identical with the self-revelation of God's inner being (in other words, God himself). See Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 54-55, 126-28. Webster offers a succint summary of Barth's position at this point in Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology*, 47-49. It is a "key principle" for Barth that "the knowledge of God is not mediated but is only unmediated." See Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 48. As Webster explains, "[t]his is not, of course, a denial that Scripture is creaturely; rather, revelation is 'unmediated' in the sense that it is free,

even as it is manifest in the given, written, form of Scripture. Van Til's summary is worth citing in full:

> (1) the human subject was created by God so that it could, by virtue of that fact, be and originally was the perfect medium of the revelation of God; (2) even after the entrance of sin, the human subject remained metaphysically accessible to God so that God could, by virtue of that fact, insert an area of perfect interpretation into the world of false interpretation; (3) God actually did insert such an infallible interpretation, or there would be no true interpretation at all; (4) we are actually crossing the river of life on this bridge of infallible interpretation.[70]

Following Bavinck, Van Til calls this the "organic view of inspiration."[71] Man is made in no way independent of God, so that "the human mind can be seen as inherently revelational of God."[72] He continues: "Being itself revelational, the mind of man is made for the reception of revelation."[73]

This explains how Van Til can predicate infallibility of Scripture. Man can truly, if not completely, think God's thoughts after him, for this is the consequence of Van Til's analogical epistemology. God, for his part, can use human language,[74] human rationality, history, and even the universe to reveal himself, *and this is the most fitting and appropriate way for him to do so*, given the nature of the Creator/

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interruptive, what Barth calls 'isolated'."

70. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 251. For the "river" and "bridge" metaphor, see further Van Til's discussion on this page about the *autographa* of Scripture.

71. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:442-43. As his editor notes, by "organic" Van Til means "living, interconnected." See Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 256. See also Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 224n2.

James Eglinton has suggested that Bavinck may have defended his use of the incarnational analogy in respect of Scripture by "falling back on his insistence on the analogous nature of all revelation." The theologian, similarly, may only speak by means of analogy, albeit "remotely." See Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 175.

72. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 262.

73. Ibid., 266.

74. For more on language, see the next subsection.

creature relation and distinction. For Van Til, to designate Scripture as "revelation," and to predicate divine properties of it, is not, therefore, to "breach the barrier between created and uncreated." Indeed, "barrier" is surely the wrong word to describe Van Til's view: rather than a "barrier" which must not be "broken," Van Til sees between God and creation a "relation" which must not be "reversed," and a "distinction" which must not be "blurred," at the same time as he finds an ontological and epistemological conduit between Creator and creature that *necessarily* inheres because of the nature of this relation, grounded as it is in the economy of the divine works *ad extra*.

For Webster, revelation is not merely epistemological. Because revelation is equated with God's Triune being in its active self-presence, revelation is also an *ontological* category. This is why anything we say about revelation automatically has consequences for the being of God, and why Webster is so careful to "protect" revelation from any sort of domestication. To equate Scripture with revelation, on Webster's terms, would necessarily be to divinise the Bible, or else to bring God down into human possession.

Is there any way around this apparent *impasse*? Is it possible to affirm Webster's claim that revelation cannot be appropriated subjectively and savingly without the active self-presence of God, while maintaining a sense in which revelation is equated with the words of Scripture, and to that extent, at least, is "objectified"? One potential set of conceptual resources is deployed by Webster himself later in his career in an essay of 2009.[75] In that essay, Webster defines the external (objective) cognitive principle as "the Word of God presented through the embassy of the prophets and apostles," and the internal (subjective) cognitive

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75. Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," repr. in *DoW*, 133-49. I am indebted to Bruce Pass for suggesting this line of argument.

principle as "the redeemed intelligence of the saints."[76] These principles are then specifically applied to the works of Son and Spirit.[77] If this distinction is accepted, it is then possible to account for Scripture as (one form of) the "objectified" ectype of revelation in the economy which truly – if incompletely – reflects God's archetypal knowledge, without necessarily leading to ontological consequences for the being of God. A robust account of the Spirit's necessary work if revelation is to be subjectively appropriated guards against Webster's worry that "objectifying" revelation cuts it adrift from the work, and active presence, of God. Following Van Til, the claim that Scripture embodies divine thought makes no further claim on divine ontology than the claim that the human mind, or even all creation, is revelation.

Webster is surely right to insist on the distinction between *revelata* and *modus revelationis*:

> Revelation is not an historical quantity *tout court* [...] There is, of course, historical form which theological reflection may not pass over; but that form has not only an unforgettable density but also a finality, and therefore an instrumental character, such that spiritual intelligence may not terminate there. Revelation [*modus revelationis*] beckons theological intelligence to consider the cause of revelation [*revelata*], and to receive it as an embassy of that which cannot be resolved into or exhausted by historical manifestation.[78]

On this construal, revelation [*revelata*] is indeed kept out of human hands (Webster's intention), but at the same time it is also somehow kept at arm's length from its human recipients. Whether the supposed gain in "guarding" revelation from human manipulation is worth the potential loss that a residually dialectic account of revelation implies for the possibility of true knowledge of God, is at least questionable. To be sure, there is always a (rightly-chastened) dialectic involved in

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76. Ibid., 135. Previously, Webster had not developed the distinction between the external and internal noetic principle.

77. Ibid., 137.

78. Webster, *GWM*, 1:6.

the eternal God revealing himself to creatures in space and time: Webster is right that this cannot be resolved without remainder. But must we necessarily choose between identifying God univocally with that which is creaturely, and insisting that God always lies beyond the creaturely forms that he sanctifies in order to mediate his presence? Is there another way? Michael Horton poetically summarises the mystery, to be considered further in the next sub-section:

> In his revelation, the God who cannot be possessed makes himself our richest treasure; the one who cannot be mastered makes himself the servant of our redemption; the one who is high and exalted makes himself lowly and the greatest sufferer of human injustice and hatred who ever lived. Yet, wonder of all wonders, even in loving us in this way, God remains transcendent, incomprehensible, and hidden.[79]

6.3.2 Overcoming Residual Dualisms: Language and Organism

In chapter four above, Angus Paddison's criticism of John Webster's bibliology – in the context of its alleged ecclesiology deficiencies – was discussed in some detail. Essentially, Paddison's critique is that Webster's doctrine does not (after all) succeed at the very point at which it claims its most significant achievement, namely *overcoming dualism*. For Paddison, Webster's overemphasis on the "vertical," transcendent aspect of Scripture means that the "horizontal," immanent aspect of Scripture's ontology as an ecclesial product is overlooked. In defending Webster against Paddison's critique, it was nevertheless acknowledged that the doctrine of Scripture as Webster constructs it *does tend to emphasise the transcendent aspect*.

More recently, Darren Sarisky has offered a critique of Webster's bibliology (albeit in the context of a largely favourable reception of his work) that, while it does

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79. Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 129.

not mention Paddison, and in fact expresses some quite different material concerns, is nevertheless closely related to Paddison's. Sarisky's conclusion is that Webster's work "does not entirely overcome the obstacle of the dualism between history and transcendence."[80] Specifically, Webster's "attempt to hold together the text [of Scripture]'s current testimony to a transcendent God and the historical setting in which it originated" is designated a partial failure.[81] Sarisky discerns "at least a whiff of a dualistic tendency evident" in Webster's description of Scripture, and in particular a lack of specification in respect of Scripture's immanent qualities and the interpretative practices that consider such qualities.[82] He admits that Webster *does* have things to say along these lines, but finds that his statements are insufficiently developed, and incompletely linked to the "much stronger and better-developed statements about the spiritual context."[83] The struggle to overcome dualism is further evidenced by a lack of clarity about the true place and value of the historical-critical method in hermeneutics.[84] In summary, Webster promises more integration than he is actually able to deliver.[85]

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80. Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 1, abstract.

81. Ibid., 2.

82. Ibid., 10-11.

83. Ibid., 12.

84. Ibid., 12-13.

85. Ibid., 13. Brad East's criticism of Webster (East, "The Church's Book," 189.) is quite similar to Sarisky's in its implications for the way readers are to engage with the Bible:

> Here is the greatest weakness of Webster's theology of Scripture [...] His method and emphases could remain the same, indeed the substance of his entire bibliology could go unchanged, while choosing to engage, at a direct and sympathetic level, with the legitimate and sincere concerns articulated by Christian as well as non-Christian critical engagements with the Bible. To do so would show that his bibliology does not operate only at 30,000 feet off the ground, but has purchase with concrete issues and challenges at the level of close interaction with the biblical texts.

The work that Webster has bequeathed to his successors is not, for Sarisky, fundamentally to reconstruct Webster's paradigm, but rather to continue to develop his insights while making up for the perceived lack in his account of Scripture's immanent (Webster himself would likely use the term "natural") properties, and the implications of these properties for the hermeneutical task. Interestingly, however, Sarisky does *not* prescribe (first and foremost, at least) more hands-on exegesis, and direct engagement with historical questions. For sure, these things are required, and Sarisky does think Webster might have done more in this regard.[86] But, the primary antidote to Webster's pathology is *theological*. Sarisky thus suggests that "more needs to be done in order to establish an *organic* connection between the Bible's contingent circumstances of origin and its testimony to the triune God."[87]

Two aspects of Sarisky's criticism (and his prescription) particularly stand out as worthy of further consideration. First, ironically and (it will be argued) most significantly, Webster himself offers *almost exactly the same critique* in respect of T. F. Torrance, as Sarisky offers in respect of Webster! If Webster is in fact himself susceptible to the same, or similar, weaknesses in his approach as Torrance is, *despite his criticism of the latter*, this suggests that there may be something more fundamentally flawed in Webster's bibliology than Sarisky admits. Second, the concept of *organicism* (which Sarisky does not particularly develop in his essay) presents itself as a possible way of deploying other resources from the Reformed tradition to help overcome the perceived deficiencies in Webster's doctrine of Scripture. These two points will now be developed.

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86. Sarisky, "Ontology of Scripture," 16-17.

87. Ibid., 2. Emphasis added.

In 2012, Webster published an essay on T. F. Torrance's doctrine of Scripture.[88] Webster is broadly favourable towards Torrance's approach, finding in the latter a similar concern to his own, namely to set the ontology of Scripture and the question of hermeneutics within the economy of God's gracious dealings with creatures. For Webster, Torrance's work represents "one of the most promising bodies of material on the Christian theology of the Bible and its interpretation from a Protestant divine of the last five or six decades."[89] Scripture, for Torrance, is to be defined in relation to God. In Torrance's account of revelation, "the relation of divine communication to the biblical texts is not fundamentally problematic, since creaturely media can fittingly perform a service in relation to the intelligible speech of God."[90] This means that Torrance, like Webster, rejects approaches to Scripture that are purely naturalistic.[91]

Torrance finds in Scripture what Webster calls an "asymmetrical yet real mode of relation between the divine Word and natural forms." Webster explains how Torrance amplifies this "basic proposal" in three ways, through the concepts of accommodation, sacrament, and reference.[92] Accommodation means that revelation and textual form need not be separated. Conversely, Scripture's sacramental nature means that the relation between the Word and the words is asymmetrical.[93] Lastly, Scripture refers beyond itself. Torrance liked to quote Athanasius: "[T]he meaning of

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88. Webster, "T. F. Torrance on Scripture," repr. as "*Verbum mirificum*: T. F. Torrance on Scripture and Hermeneutics," in *DoW*, 86-112.

89. Ibid., 87.

90. Ibid., 90.

91. Torrance distances himself from the position of B. B. Warfield, however, in his refusal to equate the divine Word with the words of Scripture.

92. Ibid., 95.

93. Ibid., 96.

the words written is not found in the letters as such but in the divine actions which they express."[94]

Turning to the question of interpretation, Webster comments on Torrance's distinctive hermeneutical approach of "depth-interpretation," by which the interpreter penetrates below the "surface" of the biblical text (understood as "sign") to the *res* to which it refers: "If the all-important property of the Bible is the semantic relation between divine Word and created text, the all-important hermeneutical activity is that of probing behind or beneath literary phenomena in order to have dealings with that which the phenomena indicate."[95] Webster acknowledges that, "at its best, [Torrance's] argument is that concepts function as summaries of what has been discerned in the process of following, penetrating, indwelling and listening to the biblical witness."[96]

But it is in this area of hermeneutics that Webster finds Torrance least convincing, at least in his practice if not his principle. As Webster explains, "[f]or Torrance, history, like syntax, is surface, that through which intelligence moves." Webster applauds Torrance's situation of Scripture in the doctrine of God and revelation. But, he avers, this "needs to be supplemented by a more spacious account of the creaturely coefficient of revelation."[97] Absence of "extended exegesis" in Torrance confirms Webster in his impression that Torrance does not take seriously enough the *text itself.*[98] Torrance "tended to view biblical interpretation as an

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94. Cited in ibid., 97.

95. Ibid., 100.

96. Ibid., 106. Webster explains each of these concepts in the preceding pages.

97. Ibid., 110.

98. Ibid. We have already seen this precise criticism of Webster himself from Wright, Moberly, and Carson.

epistemic activity whose end is concept formation: 'staying with' the text, descriptive tracing of its surface, is for him only an interim operation."[99]

Webster's response to Torrance is a fine summary of his own position on this point:

> The *res* chooses to present itself in this *signum*, the biblical text in all its grammatical, literary and historical features. The sign is the availability of the matter. The text does not, of course, make the Word comprehensively available or transparent; but the Word's relation to the text is more than asymptotic, and so to read the text as natural sign *is* to hear the divine Word in (not only behind or beneath) its textual surface.[100]

What is the reader to make of all this? A close study of Sarisky's criticism of Webster reveals that it is, in both form and substance, extremely similar to Webster's critique of Torrance.[101] If, as Sarisky argues, Webster's doctrine of Scripture falls short at exactly the same point as Torrance's, and Webster's bibliology is therefore lacking precisely where he thinks it is – or should be – most effective (*i.e.* in overcoming the dualism between the transcendent and immanent aspects of Scripture) this strongly suggests that there may be a more significant, structural weakness in Webster's bibliology than Sarisky allows. The precise nature of this weakness will now be examined.

We have previously noted John Webster's repeated citation of Augustine's maxim: "God speaks from his human temple." With that idea in the background, here we address further the concept of language itself. How does God "speak"? And, how do human words relate to that divine speech? First, it is important to understand what Webster means by the "Word" of God. The divine Word refers to

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99. Ibid., 112.

100. Ibid.

101. Interestingly, although Sarisky cites frequently from various of the essays in *DoW*, he does not refer specifically to the "*Verbum mirificum*" essay on Torrance.

the "resplendent, outgoing and therefore eloquent" second Person of the Trinity, in his risen and exalted glory.[102] God's eloquence is a function of his presence, which in relation to creatures is by definition *communicative*.[103] Such communication is not confined to the economy. The Triune God is essentially and absolutely verbal (for the eternal relation between the Father and the Son is precisely that of the generation of God's Word), and in his temporal relation to creatures the Word of God necessarily communicates his address in and as the Person of the risen Lord Jesus. Of this divine Person, Webster writes, "his being as 'word' is not activated in response to the exercise of creaturely attention [...] His speech is not responsive but self-declaratory."[104] "Word" is thus a description of divine ontology: it is also a description of divine self-communication, with the same semantic range as "revelation." God's word, according to Webster, is "the magisterial self-utterance" of the risen Lord Jesus.[105]

How does this divine speech relate to human language? As we have seen, Webster acknowledges "God's providential ordering of human speech and reason," to the purpose of revelation.[106] Rather than specifying exactly how this works, Webster appeals to a maxim: "Dogmatics follows the rule: 'What God does, God can do'."[107] Although Webster rejects an incarnational analogy for Scripture, this

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102. Ibid., 35.

103. Ibid.

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid. Interestingly, here Webster does not capitalise "word," and he places it in inverted commas. This seems to indicate a distinction between the metaphysical "Word" of God as the second Person of the Trinity, and the revelatory "word" of God given in his self-communication, although Webster does not make this clear. Usually, Webster avoids speaking of the "word" of God in distinction to the "Word," preferring the distinction between the divine Word and the human words (or, less commonly, word) of Scripture.

106. Ibid., 6.

107. Webster, "Lecture 4: Immanuel." This is, as Webster acknowledges elsewhere, Barth's

particular divine *virtus* is exemplified in the incarnation, in which event, "Word and creatureliness do not compete. Word can become flesh, without diminution of either."[108] Thus when Webster refers to the spoken words of Jesus in his earthly history, he says that "Jesus speaks, and he is not simply an element in the world's distorted economy of communication: his word is authoritative, because self-authored, wholly original, and free. In the human speech of this man, there occurs an act of divine power: God's instruction, warning, and promise are heard when [Jesus] speaks."[109] The earlier Webster could write that "[t]here is no straight line from the text to the speech or Word of God, and its human language is not something of which divine speech can be unambiguously predicated. Here God speaks in a veiled form, sacramentally."[110]As indicated in the previous sub-sections, Webster moves away from (Barth's) occasionalism and dialecticism on this front, arguing that created language and intelligence are sanctified ("horizontally," as well as "vertically") to be(come) the servants, bearers, and signs of revelation. There is an element of mystery to all of this. But despite these developments, Webster always operates from the principle that human words cannot *be* divine words, and vice-versa.

> Consider this passage from a lecture Webster gave in 2007:
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> > The eternal Word made flesh, now enthroned at the right hand of the Father, is present and eloquent. His state of exaltation does not entail his absence from or silence within the realm within which he once acted in self-humiliation; rather, his exaltation is the condition for and empowerment of his unhindered activity and address of creatures. This address takes the form of Holy Scripture. To accomplish his communicative mission, the exalted Son takes into his service a textual tradition, a set of human writings, so ordering

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principle. See Webster, *Barth*, 63.

108. Webster, "Lecture 4: Immanuel."

109. Ibid.

110. Webster, *W&C*, 73.

> their course that by him they are made into living creaturely instruments of his address of living creatures. Extending himself into the structures and practices of human communication in the sending of the Holy Spirit, the divine Word commissions and sanctifies these texts to become fitting vehicles of his self-proclamation. He draws their acts into his own act of self-utterance, so that they become the words of the Word, human words uttered as a repetition of the divine Word, existing in the sphere of the divine Word's authority, effectiveness and promise.[111]

In this classic expression of Webster's developing view, we may note the ideas of "extension" and "repetition" as the grounds of the "fittingness" of Scripture to be an instrument of revelation. The parallel here with the later Webster's broader construal of the God-world relation is striking. God is not *exhausted* by his works in the economy, yet neither is he *different* from the God who is revealed in the missions of Son and Spirit. Rather, God *re*-presents or *re*-capitulates his own being in his external works, expressed historically in creaturely form. This is remarkably close to the concepts of the Word "extending himself" into human communication, and "repeating himself" in human words.

Because "God is in himself living speech," he is able to take "creaturely words into his service [...] and restor[e] their function as a sign of God's glory."[112] Here, Webster references Richard B. Gaffin's reflections on language and its uses in God's economy.[113] But how close is Webster actually to Gaffin in this regard? Gaffin offers his readers "a theological meditation on Scripture pertinent to language and its use."[114] From Psalm 94:9-10, he describes the contours of the relationship between

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111. Webster, *DoW*, 8.

112. Ibid., 59.

113. See Richard B. Gaffin, "Speech and the Image of God: Biblical Reflections on Language and Its Uses," in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries. Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004). Citations are all from the Kindle version, n.p.

114. Ibid.

uncreated and created being, knowledge, and speech. This relationship is one of the *derivation* of creaturely realities from the divine. In respect of speech, therefore, "our capacity for language and other forms of communication is derivative of [God's]."[115] Gaffin links this derivation to his understanding of the concept of the *imago Dei* from Genesis 1:26. For Gaffin, God himself "in the person of his Son is originally and from all eternity *the* Word (John 1:1)."[116] God's human creatures, as divine image-bearers, "are, specifically, *Word*-bearers, and we are that essentially, inveterately, irremediably."[117] Gaffin develops this idea into a very strong statement of the essential readiness of created humanity to enter into communicative relationship with God. The covenant (not, at this point, the covenant of grace, but the covenant of creation, or of "works"), which "structures our image-bearing existence," establishes the fact that we are "created for communication."[118]

Gaffin argues that human language, as divine gift, is inherently suited to this purpose. Despite sin and its consequences, "[h]uman language does not inherently veil and confuse as it seeks to communicate and disclose meaning. It does not inevitably create a distortion of the subject matter about which it speaks. Human language is not an intrinsically inadequate medium for communicating."[119] As Gaffin unpacks this thesis, he makes stronger affirmations than Webster does concerning the written words of Scripture as human words which are nevertheless "God's own words," and this has implications for everything that human beings are able to say, *theologically* as in every other field of communication:

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115. Ibid.

116. Ibid.

117. Ibid.

118. Ibid.

119. Ibid.

> [T]he reality of God's inscripturated Word, the phenomenon itself of human language that by virtue of its unique origin has a consequent character and authority that is "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), so that, like God himself and as his Word, it is "living and active" and all-discerning (Heb. 4:12)—that phenomenon stands as the promise that our own use of language, as part of our "labor in the Lord," is "not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58)."[120]

To be clear, Gaffin is not eliding the Creator-creature distinction, whether now or in the *eschaton*. But he is certainly more sanguine than Webster about the possibilities for a true, if analogical, coherence of the divine Word and human words. Divine-human communication is not, for Gaffin, a miracle of divine grace, if that means it is somehow interruptive of, or foreign to, created nature. We are created communicators, and just as God enters into a covenant relationship with his people coterminously with their creation, so the gift of language is concreated with God's Word-bearers.

Recently, American theologian Pierce Taylor Hibbs has contributed some important work to the Reformed theological discussion of language and its relationship to God, drawing on the ideas of linguistic theorist Kenneth L. Pike, as well as a number of Reformed theologians, including Cornelius Van Til, Vern Poythress, and John Frame.[121] In many respects, Hibbs builds on Gaffin's position outlined above. Hibbs' thesis is that,

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120. Ibid. Gaffin is sober about the implications of the Fall for the full realisation of such communication in this age, but he affirms the eschatological hope that "undreamed-of media possibilities will open up, or, if that seems too speculative, we will communicate as never before." (Ibid.)

121. Hibbs' original dissertation on this subject has been published as Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior: A Reformed Exposition of the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2018). See also his further-refined ideas in Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Speaking Trinity and His Worded World: Why Language is At the Center of Everything* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018). As Hibbs himself acknowledges, he is not particularly contributing new insights in his work. However, drawing Pike into fruitful conversation with the theologians mentioned above is novel and illuminating.

> language is central to reality because the Trinity is linguistic (communicative) and has formed, shaped, and continues to direct everything through his speech. All of reality reflects the word of its maker, and because its maker is triune and communicative, all of reality is what we might call *tristructual* [*sic.*] and expressive.[122]

For our purposes, the most important aspects of Hibbs' argument are four of his "basic assumptions," namely (first) that "language is a proper divine behavior."[123] This refers to the intra-trinitarian communication that is characteristic of God *a se*. Hibbs speaks of language as a "behavio[u]r" because he understands it as "part of a spectrum of personal action that is structurally integrated with everything else that personal beings do."[124] Second, for Hibbs (echoing Gaffin) "language is an imaging behavior."[125] Third, (again echoing Gaffin) "language [like all of reality] is covenantal," just as "all of reality is linguistic."[126] Fourth, and finally, "language is representational."[127] By this Hibbs means that our words and ideas (the expressions of our language) reflect our epistemology and our metaphysics. We (and God) communicate *ourselves*.

Further, Hibbs argues that Son of God is not just a "user" of language, in his incarnation. Rather, "he *is* language: divine discourse from the Father, uttered in the power of the Holy Ghost."[128] Because the Son of God is the ground of all human

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122. Ibid., ch. 1. Emphasis removed. "Tri-structural" is a term that Hibbs borrows from Kenneth Pike.

123. Ibid. Emphasis removed.

124. Ibid.

125. Ibid. Emphasis removed.

126. Ibid. Emphasis removed.

127. Ibid. Emphasis removed.

128. Ibid., ch. 2.

ontology, "language is, in a derivative way, embedded in our personhood, too."[129] Undergirding all the acts of personal agents, language is *communicative* of persons. It is thus, in a non-theologically-specific sense, *revelatory*. Applied to God himself, this view of language comports well with Webster's insistence on revelation as both the act and being of God, which fosters (saving) communion with human creatures. But there are important differences.

The first is that Hibbs, like Gaffin, expresses clearly the idea that *all creation* is communicative of God, and particularly of his Trinitarian being.[130] We live in a "worded world" (*per* the title of Hibbs' book). Hibbs takes his thesis even further, in terms of the question of the relationship between human language and the divine Word. He argues, drawing on a range of biblical material, that there is an "analogical connection between persons and words," so that "every [human] person can be understood as a word fitly spoken by the Trinity."[131] This idea is carefully caveated. We humans, and indeed the rest of creation, are "the *products* of divine speech, not divine speech itself."[132] This affirmation is necessary in order to uphold the Creator-

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129. Ibid.

130. Ibid., ch. 3. Hibbs finds this idea in Bavinck, among others. (See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:333.) More on Bavinck follows below. A similar argument, linking the Trinity to creation, is also developed in Ralph A. Smith, *Trinity and Reality: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2004), 72. A related understanding is expressed in the idiom of "conversation" by Christoph Schwöbel, who writes that "[t]he conversation about God and with God is rooted in the fact that God engages in conversation with his creation, from creation until the consummation of God's conversations with his creation in the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, that God engages in conversation with his creation is rooted in God's own being as conversation so that the being of the world has its ground in the conversation that God is." Christoph Schwöbel, "God as Conversation: Reflections on A Theological Ontology of Communicative Relations," in *Theology and Conversation: Towards A Relational Theology*, eds. Jacques Haers and Peter De May (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 45.

131. Hibbs, *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior*, 177.

132. Ibid. The distinction is reminiscent of the essence/energies distinction as developed by Michael Horton, and discussed in the previous chapter.

creature distinction. But at the same time, we may say in a metaphorical sense that we are "*creaturely* analogues" of divine words, where such words are interpreted as truly reflective of the being of God himself as divine Speaker.[133] Our "semantic value" as divine words is found in "our participant response to the eternal Word who took on a human nature."[134]

The theologically "thick description" of human linguistic behaviour offered by Hibbs contrasts with that of Webster, in whose account something significant seems to be lacking.[135] Despite his metaphysical turn, Webster's description of language and its human use still appears insufficiently grounded in the doctrine of creation, and in a truly analogical epistemology. This has a knock-on effect on his bibliology, in which the establishment of a relationship between the divine Word and human words remains too occasional, too dialectic, as God's "commissioning" of the texts of Scripture makes them in some way "fitting" to reveal him. For Hibbs, in contrast, all of creation is the communication of God in the establishment of a creaturely analogue to the divine Word. This created word truly, sufficiently, and analogically (though not, and indeed never, exhaustively) *is* the divine Word. On such a paradigm, there is no need for reticence in acknowledging the fittingness of human words to stand for revelation. The Bible may be understood as a *product* of the (special) revelation of God: at the same time, it is a *creaturely analogue* of that special revelation. The words of the Bible, for all their humanity, are not therefore sufficiently designated a mere creaturely "auxiliary of," or "witness to," revelation.

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133. Ibid., 178. Emphasis original.

134. Ibid.

135. Hibbs does not describe his description as "thick." The term is adapted from its use by anthropologist Clifford Geertz to describe an ethnological methodology that pays attention to the contexts of human behaviours. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

The notions of assistance and testimony are helpful as far as they go, but they stop short of expressing the linguistic *coinherence* of the biblical words and the revelation of God. Such terminology is not intended to obscure the *derivative* nature of the words of the Bible from the divine Word, but to focus attention on the character of that derivation: above all, it is *organic*.

This brings us to the second notable aspect of Sarisky's critique of Webster, namely, his passing mention of the concept of *organicism* as a possible way of articulating the relationship between, on the one hand, the contingent, historical features of the biblical text(s) and, on the other hand, its theologically-defined ontology as Holy Scripture. As suggested in the paragraphs above, Webster might have made use of resources in the Reformed tradition to ground his understanding of human language as truly, if analogically, revelatory.[136] This, it will be argued, would be a plausible way out of the residual dualism that Sarisky detects in Webster's doctrine of Scripture.

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136. R. David Nelson has suggested that Webster operates with an "analogy of language." Nelson's primary concern is to elucidate the way in which Webster relates the Bible analogically to other texts such as creeds, confessions, and commentaries. But for Nelson, this *via analogia* runs deeper, so that

> at the very heart of [Webster's] proposal is a series of *proportionalities* described according to *spatial language* such that the description *preserves relational identity and difference*. That is the essence of analogy. Webster's is an analogy of *language*, precisely insofar as the proportionalities are drawn between communicative events; most broadly, between (a) God's self-revelation and (b) all of the events and structures of human language that correspond and, dare we say, participate in God's self-revelation.

Without taking issue with Nelson's basic claim in respect of "proportionalities," it still needs to be said that if Webster does conceive of an analogy between the divine Word and human words, it is not the same as the analogical relationship proposed by theologians such as Bavinck and Vos, who can describe the words of the Bible as, analogically, the Word of God. See R. David Nelson, "Webster and Ebeling on Christian Texts: A Placeholder for A Theology of Language," in *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster*, eds. R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky, and Justin Stratis (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 209-10.

Herman Bavinck may not have been the theologian in Sarisky's mind when he called for an "organic" solution to the persistent problem of dualism in Webster, but Bavinck features here as an exemplary proponent of the sort of organicism that is also found explicitly in Geerhardus Vos and, by extension and often by implication, more recent theologians such as Gaffin and Hibbs. The fundamental importance of the "organic motif" in Herman Bavinck's theology has been widely recognised, especially following the publication of James Eglinton's monograph on the subject.[137] Here, the focus will be on the way that Bavinck articulates an organic relationship between God, the world, and Holy Scripture.[138] According to Eglinton, the Bavinckian organic motif is grounded in "a richly Trinitarian doctrine of God as received by the Patristic and Reformation traditions [...which] accounts for the triniformity so abundant throughout all created reality. God as archetypal (triune) unity-in-diversity is the basis for all subsequent (triniform) ectypal cosmic unity-in-diversity."[139] In other words, for Bavinck the organic motif functions as a way of articulating the nature of the relationship between creaturely realities and the Triune God. It is Eglinton's contention that Bavinck scholars have (mistakenly) tended to identify "irreconcilable dualism" in the Dutch theologian's work: the way through these alleged dualisms is therefore a proper understanding of how the organic motif operates for Bavinck.[140]

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137. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*.

138. Once again, it should be pointed out that the interest here is not only in Bavinck's "organic" theory of inspiration (as opposed to, for instance, a "dictation" theory), but to his use of the concept of the organism to explain the relationship between divine and human being and act, in the broadest sense.

139. Ibid., 54. See also Eglinton's further development of this definition in ibid., 79.

140. Ibid., 156. For Eglinton, the so called "two Bavincks" (modern Bavinck and traditional/ confessional Bavinck) thesis is defunct. Bavinck is a thoroughly integrated thinker, and the organism is a highly successful way of combating a whole range of dualisms that can plague theology.

In respect of Holy Scripture, Bavinck's organic motif functions along the following lines. All creaturely realities (nature and history) constitute one, organic unity-in-diversity, shaped by the Holy Trinity as an ectypal reflection of his archetypal essence.[141] Within this universal context, Holy Scripture is also described by Bavinck as a single organism.[142] In addition, the organic motif is employed by Bavinck in his defence of "organic" inspiration.[143] Eglinton's survey of the intellectual context in nineteenth-century Holland leads him to conclude:

> The core problem [for theologians of the day] is the sense in which Scripture can be both human and divine. The tendency perceived by Bavinck is to always choose one or the other. In context, it seems evident that Bavinck sought some kind of synthetic model whereby one might affirm that Scripture is the product of both divine and human authors.[144]

It is precisely because Bavinck works from an understanding of God as Trinity who creates a unified-yet-diverse, organic ectype of his being, that he insists on holding (and is able to hold) together the divine and human aspects of Scripture. As Eglinton observes, Bavinck's doctrine of organic inspiration extends beyond past acts of inscripturation to the ongoing illuminating work of the Spirit in the hearts of the human recipients of divine revelation in and through Scripture.[145] All of this finds echoes and parallels of various sorts in Webster, even though organic language *per se* is rarely found in his work.[146]

There is more that needs to be said, however, if Sarisky's concerns about

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141. Ibid. This description comports with Bavinck's account of general revelation.

142. Ibid., 159.

143. Ibid., 160.

144. Ibid., 168.

145. Ibid., 180-81.

146. Webster affirms an organic view of inspiration in Webster, *DoW*, 17. As noted above, this is not the same as the concept of organicism.

Webster's residual dualism are to be satisfied along Bavinckian lines. In an important section of his *Reformed Dogmatics* on "incarnation, language, and the Bible," Bavinck lays out his understanding of the relationship between, on the one hand, God and history, and on the other hand, God and *words*, specifically the words of the Bible.[147] Key to this section is the idea that Scripture and revelation are not to be identified, yet equally, "in many cases revelation and divine inspiration (θεοπνευστια) *do coincide*."[148] Bavinck concludes, "[t]he right view is one in which Scripture is neither equated with revelation not detached from it and placed outside of it."[149] In this, the necessarily historical form of revelation must not be neglected: "Precisely because revelation is history there is no way to learn something about it other than the ordinary way that applies to all of history, and that is human attestation."[150] Furthermore, human language is fitted to reveal God. Bavinck recognises that "[t]he bearer of the ideal goods of humankind is language, and the σαρξ of language is the written word. In making himself known, God adapts himself to this reality."[151] Perhaps, following the later work of Gaffin and Hibbs, we might rephrase Bavinck: in making himself known, God creates an ectypal, historical, and linguistic, *creaturely* reality that is perfectly adapted to the self-revelation of the archetypal God. If Webster had followed these theologians in their organicism, he may have been better able to overcome some of the residual dualisms in his doctrine of Scripture.

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147. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:380-82.

148. Ibid., 1:381. Emphasis added. Bavinck sees the first insight as modern theology's correct distinction, as opposed to earlier (Protestant orthodox) theology.

149. Ibid., 1:382.

150. Ibid. As Vanhoozer puts it, "only God's word disambiguates God's deed." See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 213.

151. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:380.

6.3.3 Revelation Again: Let the Circuit be Unbroken

A final aspect of Webster's doctrine of Scripture that requires more critical attention arises as a consequence of some of the theological moves described in the previous sections. It will be argued here that Webster's assertion that divine self-revelation is *necessarily* the reconciliation of lost creatures, leads him to join up the revelatory "circuit of the Spirit" more neatly than the biblical data allows.[152]

Donald A. Carson has challenged Webster's apparent reluctance to accept the Bible as revelatory in function except when it is fruitfully received.[153] Webster certainly is reluctant on this score, because he understands the faithful human response to revelation as ingredient to the revealing act. The surface-level problem with this assumption is that there are many examples of God speaking in Scripture which are evidently *not* saving or reconciliatory; in fact, their stated intention is to condemn. Perhaps the *locus classicus* in this regard is YHWH's word to the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:9-10, referenced by Jesus in Mark 4:12 and parallels, in respect of his own teaching ministry):

> Go and say to this people:
> 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
> keep looking, but do not understand.'
> Make the mind of this people dull,
> and stop their ears,
> and shut their eyes,
> so that they may not look with their eyes,

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152. This phrase, borrowed from de Senarclens, was introduced in chapter four.

153. Allen concedes that Webster might have been clearer at this point, but argues that Webster was not trying to "tease out the full range of "ends" which Holy Scripture accomplishes, only touching on its ideal result (reconciliation) and never addressing its role regarding judgment." Allen's principle is that "an omission cannot be taken as a commission, at least not when the immediate and wider contexts suggest otherwise." See Allen, "Toward Theological Theology," 225n, 226n. Allen is correct in principle, but whether he is correct about the contexts, and Webster's intentions, is certainly open to dispute.

and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed. (NRSV)

It is clear from this text that the word of YHWH through the prophet has neither saving purpose nor saving force. Rather the opposite: the word falls on deaf ears, and dull minds. The word is heard, but not truly received or comprehended. It does not give rise to healing (*i.e.* reconciliation), but to condemnation. Yet within the thought-world of the Isaianic prophetic tradition, such a word from YHWH is by no means "lacking" either in purpose or in power; indeed, in this context its very purpose is to confirm the hard-hearted in their sin and consequent death, and it is a foundational concept in the Book of Isaiah that no word from YHWH fails to achieve the purpose for which it is given or sent (55:10-11).

According to Carson, at this point of definition Webster is thus "more Barthian than biblical."[154] Carson points out that Scripture "is quite prepared to talk about the reality of God's revelation *even where no reconciliation takes place, even when God's revelation is spurned.*"[155] In a later article on the exordium of the epistle to the Hebrews, Webster does recognise that in the circumstances that prompted the writing of the epistle, "[t]he Word scarcely finds a creaturely coordinate in the community [...] there is the pressing danger that the Word does not profit its hearers because they fail to 'incorporate it by faith' (4.2) – to allow the objective to condition and vivify the subjective."[156] In this situation, "the Word becomes the community's

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154. Carson, "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," in *Collected Writings on Scripture*, 248. Brad East thinks this criticism of Webster by Carson is "ironic," given Webster's steady distancing from Barth at various points. But Carson is speaking about the definition of revelation rather than making a general observation, and so his criticism is not off-the-mark. See East, "The Church's Book," 113n.

155. Carson, "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," 248.

156. Webster, "One Who is Son," in *GWM*, 1:61.

judge: living, active, powerful, piercing, critical."[157] But this does not mean that Webster allows for revelation to have a non-reconciling function, for this judging function of Holy Scripture is the mortification that finds its necessary counterpart in vivification. Ultimately, the Word *will* find its "creaturely coordinate" and the revelation to which the written word witnesses will be reconciliatory.

Why does Webster hold this view? First, this may be understood as a function of his lack of a doctrine of general revelation, discussed above. If there is no such thing as a general revelation of God that is sufficient to render human beings guilty, but insufficient to save them, then it is more plausible to suggest that all revelation is salvific. Second, there is a tendency towards universalism in Webster's theology, that pushes against the acknowledgment of a non-saving revelation of God. For Webster, "*[a]ll* human life takes place in the evangelical condition."[158] The suggestion here is not that Webster taught *apokatastasis*, but that he sometimes expressed doctrinal points in ways that tended towards universalism, and that his exegesis of certain favoured passages of Scripture (especially from Ephesians and Colossians) did not typically give sufficient canonical weight to other biblical affirmations that support an eternal antithesis.[159] But there is a third, and most

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157. Ibid.

158. Webster, *GWM*, 2:168. Some of the most "universalistic" expressions in Webster's work are found in his published sermons. See especially the sermons entitled "The Great Contrast," "Believe in the Lord Jesus," "The Triumph of Divine Resolve," and "Yes in Christ," in Webster, *The Grace of Truth*.

159. This is of course a complex question, which cannot be discussed in detail here, but there is a particularly revealing exchange in the Q&A session following the second of his three Reformation Day lectures given at Covenant College in Georgia in 2008, in which Webster specifically addressed the question of universalism. See John Webster, "The Son's Redemption," *Reformation Day Lectures on Ephesians at Covenant College* (2008). The question asked for comment on the issue of double predestination. Webster's answer begins at 19:27 in the recording available at itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-sons-redemption/id426496810?i=1000092158975&mt=2, accessed 1 June 2018.
Webster recalls there that he used to think that "the notion of a double decree was not going

important, reason why Webster is reluctant to allow a non-saving revelation (which grounds and establishes the previous two reasons) and that is Webster's equation of revelation with the being of God. Because, for Webster, God re-presents his essence in the temporal (saving) missions of the Son and the Spirit in the economy, God reveals himself to be the gracious, saving God that he is. The aseity of God does not "qualify" the salvific promeity of God, rather, the former grounds and establishes the latter.

Like Webster, Herman Bavinck argued that it is "completely correct to say that special revelation bears a soteriological character and is salvific."[160] Special revelation consists of both "the announcement of truth" *and* "a communication of life."[161] This means that the *purpose* of special revelation, for Bavinck, is primarily "God himself" (in the sense that it results in the glory of God) and secondarily "the end of re-creating the whole person after God's image and likeness and thus to transform that person into a mirror of God's attributes and perfections" in the

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anywhere," but that he no longer holds that view, on the basis of exegetical considerations. "If you read the New Testament," he says, "you are bound in the end to come up with some kind of account of a double divine decree." This suggests a clear departure from Barth, who famously described the doctrine of double predestination as one that should be "repudiated with horror." (Barth, *CD*, II.2, 18.) However, the argument here is not that Webster tended towards universalism in precisely the same way that Barth did, but that Webster's own position came very close to universalism, sometimes in ways similar to Barth. Webster may have come to embrace "some kind of account" of double predestination, but that does not mean that he ever accepted the traditional Reformed (see, for example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, III.7) double decree without remainder. There is no space here to cite Webster's lengthy response to this question in full, and readers are directed to the online recording. Sometimes in responding to his post-lecture interlocutor, Webster sounds like he is simply defending an Augustinian theodicy. But Webster goes beyond Augustine in his emphasis of a biblical "drive towards the fact that God's purpose is going to be unstoppable in its universal scope."

160. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:345.

161. Ibid.

context of the redemption of the entire cosmos.[162] Bavinck thought that special revelation is only truly effective, or complete, when it results in salvation. His view is related to his doctrine of God, and specifically to his Trinitarian understanding of the Spirit as the one who completes revelation by bringing about subjective revelation in the human recipient.[163] Special revelation is thus given objectively in the past, but it includes a subjective, eschatological fulfilment, which "in a broad sense can be called revelation but for the sake of clarity can be better described as illumination."[164] The resolute God-centredness of Bavinck's understanding of revelation is welcome. Likewise, his insistence on acknowledging the subjective aspect of revelation is an important corrective to elements of the Reformed tradition. However, legitimate questions may be raised in respect of views of revelation that tie it very closely to redemption. Such questions are less pressing for Bavinck, perhaps, given his readiness to rule out *apokatastasis* categorically, albeit in the hope of the "wideness of God's mercy."[165] But the questions are more pressing, it is suggested, for Webster.

John Frame has observed modern theology's tendency (since Schleiermacher) to deny that revelation exists until it is received or known, and has characterised this as the "subjective turn" in the history of the doctrine of revelation.[166] Frame writes (in a way that Bavinck and Webster would accept) that it is correct to acknowledge a subjective element to God's revelation, because "[a]ll true communication is objective (the content and the transmission) and subjective

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162. Ibid., 1:346.

163. Ibid., 1:347-48.

164. Ibid., 1:350.

165. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 724-27.

166. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 38.

(the hearing and the response)."[167] But if the objective element is lost sight of, as Frame rightly recognises, "[t]his idea contributes to [...] universalistic tendencies," because "it regards those who reject God as those who have not received revelation, rather than (as in Romans 1) those who have received it and neglected it."[168] Frame therefore insists that we make room for the category of "revelation received subjectively in unbelief."[169] It is this category that is missing from John Webster's bibliology.

Is it possible that God's purpose in revealing himself might ever be non-salvific, and if so, how may we articulate this theologically? A helpful model for expressing what might be called a "double teleology" understanding of special revelation is suggested by the use of speech-act theory in the formulation of a doctrine of Scripture.[170] In his discussion of "covenantal discourse," Scott Swain argues that this discourse between God and creatures brings about the "goal of divine self-communication and fellowship," and that this happens "by means of God's multifaceted word."[171] Swain, like Kevin Vanhoozer, employs speech-act theory to explain how this occurs in practice. Swain notes that "perlocutionary acts [speech acts considered at the level of their consequences] may be intended or unintended. A promise may result not only in trust; it may also result in skepticism."[172] Indeed, this recognition is made explicit in Swain's treatment of Jesus' promise in John 6:35.

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167. Ibid., 39.

168. Ibid., 38.

169. Ibid., 289-90. Although Frame references Rom 1 (a text that is usually understood to refer to general revelation) he is clear that special revelation is also sometimes "received subjectively in unbelief," when this is "God's very purpose in communication." As Frame recognises, this happens "[m]ysteriously."

170. This is the approach taken in Vanhoozer, *First Theology*.

171. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 41.

172. Ibid., 42.

However, Swain does not at this point consider the possibility that a certain illocutionary act (a performative speech act of an agent) may anticipate (and *intend* to create) a *range* of intended perlocutionary responses, which may well be as disparate as faith and unbelief. It may therefore be true that, on the one hand, "[t]hese words [of God] are effectual, spiritual means for establishing covenant relationship,"[173] while on the other hand, equally true that the same words are effectual, spiritual means for hardening human hearts *against* God. *Both* may be divinely-intended, Spirit-wrought perlocutionary acts on the part of different human agents to the *same* (objectively-considered) special revelation.

It remains a mystery exactly how God could have a will for the world characterised by what we have called "double teleology." In particular, concerns may be raised that such a proposal threatens divine simplicity, or compromises biblical statements about the reconciliation of "all things."[174] Any response to such concerns (the development of which response is beyond the scope of this thesis) might begin with the acknowledgment that what appears to us to be a "double" teleology need not imply that God has more than one will or purpose, any more than the co-existence of mercy and justice as divine attributes means that God is in some way divided. In sum, John Webster's articulation of revelation as a soteriological "success word"[175] leaves him open to legitimate criticisms that he does not take with sufficient seriousness the category of God's revelation to the unreconciled.

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173. Ibid., 43.

174. Especially, perhaps, Col 1:20, a favourite of John Webster's!

175. See chapter three above for this designation.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has developed a critical evaluation of John Webster's doctrine of Scripture. A brief positive assessment of his contribution was followed by three main areas of criticism, linked by the suggestion that Webster was only partly successful in his aim to find a non-dualistic way between "naturalism" and "supernaturalism" in respect of Scripture.

First, Webster was brought into conversation with other modern Reformed theologians (especially Vos and Bavinck) to point up the lack of a doctrine of general revelation in his theology. This lack, it was suggested, is an important contributory factor to Webster's reluctance to describe Holy Scripture as "revelation." For these other theologians, all creation is divine self-revelation, at least when considered *sub specie aeternitatis*. Scripture is characterised by these theologians as an organ within the organism that is the universal, redemptive and revelatory, natural and historical, self-unfolding of God *in* and *for* the world. Webster resists this view of the God-creature relation on the basis of his convictions that: (1) human language cannot be intrinsically capable of revealing God, because revelation must be preserved as a fundamentally *gracious* concept; and, related to this, (2) understanding all nature and history as directly revelatory somehow compromises the being of God.

In reply to both these concerns, it was suggested that the resources to meet them are actually already there (potentially) in the later Webster's account of the God-creature relation. Thus, in respect of (1), the later Webster's focus on the doctrine of creation and creation's integrity as a manifestation of the unfolding of God's gracious being *prior to* the covenant of grace, might have opened up the conceptual space for him to follow Bavinck and Vos in an affirmation of general revelation. This might further have made it possible for Webster to affirm the

intrinsic (natural) fittingness of human words to reveal God. In response to (2), we have seen that the later Webster offers a robust account of the Spirit's necessary work for the subjective, human appropriation of revelation. This serves to guard against his worry that "objectifying" revelation cuts it adrift from the work, and active presence, of God. However, Webster might (following Van Til) have further recognised that the assertion that Scripture embodies divine thought makes no further claim on divine ontology than does the assertion that the human mind, or even all creation, is revelation.

Second, Webster's understanding of language itself was brought into conversation with some recent Reformed work on linguistics and epistemology, especially by Richard B. Gaffin and Pierce Hibbs. It was suggested that, despite his metaphysical turn, Webster's description of language and its human use still appears insufficiently grounded in the doctrine of creation, and in a truly analogical epistemology. This has a knock-on effect on his bibliology, in which the establishment of a relationship between the divine Word and human words remains too occasional, too dialectic, as God's "commissioning" of the texts of Scripture makes them in some way "fitting" to reveal him. For Hibbs and Gaffin, in contrast, all of creation is the communication of God in the establishment of a creaturely analogue to the divine Word. This created word truly, sufficiently, and analogically (though not, and indeed never, exhaustively) *is* the divine Word. On such a paradigm, there is no need for reticence in acknowledging the fittingness of human words to stand for revelation. It was thus argued that residual dualisms in Webster's thinking might be overcome by means of a Bavinckian, organic understanding of the relationship between God, God's world, and God's words.

Third, it was argued that Webster's view of divine self-revelation as *necessarily* the reconciliation of lost creatures is not supported by the biblical witness. Instead, a "double teleology" understanding of special revelation was

proposed, making use of speech-act theory to articulate the accomplishment of divine purposes in and through Scripture.

Afterword

John Webster applied all the powers of his renewed and passionate intellect to communicate – to both church and academy – dogmatic truths about the eloquent God and the creatures accosted, judged, and astonishingly made alive by the gracious divine address. His was a profoundly God-centred theology. Webster may have been something of a lonely soul in his earthly pilgrimage, but in all his intellectual and spiritual endeavours, he revelled in the company of the saints, both his contemporaries and the long-departed. In this sense, his was a profoundly church-oriented theology. In this thesis, John Webster's work has been at the centre of a conversation about doctrine that has ranged eclectically from the biblical witness, through Patristic, medieval, Reformation, and modern contributors, reflecting Webster's own approach to the theological task. Doubtless the conversation will continue elsewhere, and as it does John Webster's own contribution to the conversation will surely not be overlooked.

It is to be hoped that readers agree that establishing doctrinal clarity about God, revelation, and Scripture is important, though this thesis pretends to be no more than a small contribution to that ongoing endeavour. But John Webster would be dissatisfied if the call to do dogmatics were to be the final note from his *oeuvre* left ringing in our ears. Rather, he would surely urge upon us as our greatest priority that most pressing of tasks in our hearing of, and speaking about, the eloquent God – *exegesis* – and that most weighty of obligations in the reverberations of such communication – *joyful obedience*.

Appendix: Research Interview Transcripts

1. George Newlands

10 November 2017

RB: Can you tell me what you know of how John Webster came to choose the subject-area for his doctoral thesis (*i.e.* Eberhard Jüngel)? Were there other possibilities considered?

GN: The answer is, not a lot really, in one sense. I supervised John as an undergraduate, and then he decided he would like to do some postgraduate work, and was looking around for a Ph.D. thesis, and I can't remember to be honest what we discussed, what he might like to do, but I remember saying to John, "Well, there's this guy Jüngel," and I had spent a semester with him in Zurich, way back in 1968, and went to his lectures and his *Sozietät* and all that sort of stuff, and nobody in Britain seems to have, kind of, noticed him, and I think he's a very interesting person who's creative in all sorts of ways. What about Jüngel?

RB: So, was it your suggestion?

GN: Yeah, it was my suggestion. Simply because there are all the usual possibilities, and he was looking for something different, and he was obviously very bright. That was clear from day one. And so I thought, well he could actually tackle Jüngel. And so he did, and he took to Jüngel like a duck to water, and never looked back, really, in a sense. Whereas, I kind of went off Jüngel in my dotage as it were, a bit later, but it was good for John to do that, and I think it helped him to develop. Jüngel was enormously precise. You know Jüngel's stuff, it's technical, very well thought through: much more precise as a theologian than, say, Moltmann, who was much more popular and whatnot, and that suited John in a way, and I think he took a lesson from not only the substance of Jüngel but just the sheer dedication to pure theology.

RB: Yes, the methodology.

GN: Exactly, and I think that was important to him, and so he did his Ph.D. on him which was extremely good, and graduated, and I said to him, "You ought to publish

this Ph.D. ASAP because it's easier to get jobs when you've published books, because people have a number of books on the table and whoever has the biggest pile gets it, even though nobody actually opens them. So, that was that, and he didn't take my advice, and instead he wrote a book on an introduction to Jüngel's theology, which was not the same as the thesis. [...] It's very different, and I thought, well that's a good idea in one sense because we haven't got such a thing, but the thesis itself was worthy of publication as a thesis, I thought. So, anyway, that was fine, and he wrote this thing, and left Cambridge because he went to Durham, you remember. And after that I had not much personal contact with him, I mean: Christmas cards and that sort of thing.

I went to see them, I remember, when they were [...] in Canada, and they had tiny kids at that stage, and it was all very happy and whatnot and I spent a couple of nights with them, but really didn't have much contact with John later on, until I wrote an article for his *Festschrift* which was not really about Jüngel at all. Except, no, there was a thing for Jüngel's sixtieth which John edited and I wrote a piece in that of my experience of contact with Jüngel. Otherwise there was not that much personal contact [...]

RB: Someone has said to me that when John was at Cambridge he had initially planned to do John Owen as his thesis topic and that you or others encouraged him away from that and towards Jüngel. Is that something you recall?

GN: Yup, that's where I get false memory syndrome and remember things that never happened, I suspect, but John Owen does ring a bell somewhere. I wonder if he did an undergraduate dissertation on John Owen or something like that, and I probably thought that John Owen would be interesting but stuff had been done already on John Owen, and this would be a golden opportunity to do something completely different, which would be the thing to do. I certainly have come across material on John Owen in my Cambridge days, and I just can't remember who wrote it, but it might have been John.

John was a Methodist when he was an undergraduate at first. People didn't know that.

RB: So, it was as an undergraduate that he embraced Calvinism? Do you know much about his churchmanship?

GN: I don't, no. But I do know that he was a Methodist. And then he became an Anglican priest, and various Anglican priests have said, "Oh, he's not really an Anglican. He's always been a Methodist," or something like that, or even a Calvinist, Presbyterian, or something.

RB: He describes himself in one of his autobiographical pieces, and he talks about having grown up in [...] Methodism, and then he says [that he] embraced a robust Calvinism, but I didn't know when that was.

GN: Well, it wasn't that I was coming across as a sort of strict Calvinist Presbyterian. Just ask James [Eglinton]: he'll put you right on that. [laughs] So, no problem there!

I suppose, at the time, just thinking of who was around in Cambridge. This would be the late 1970s, I think he graduated Ph.D. in 1982 or something like that. [...] There's [Donald] McKinnon, who was a very strong influence in philosophical theology. I think John was influenced by McKinnon, probably, though he didn't regard McKinnon as the great guru he is now seen as in a sense. And Gordon Rupp, of course, was the great Methodist scholar [...] professor of ecclesiastical history, and he wrote lots of books on Luther, and he was a very powerful Methodist, probably *the* most powerful Methodist figure that there's been since. He was very much into Luther, and ecumenical theology. He was very keen on Anglican-Methodist relationships, union, and that sort of thing. How far John had to do with Rupp, I don't know. He would have gone to some of his lectures. And then, Stephen Sykes was there at that time as a colleague of mine, and he was trying to persuade Cambridge to do systematic theology, which it had never done, as Anglicans don't do that kind of thing. So, he would certainly have been an influence [*Wikipedia* indicates that Sykes moved from Cambridge to Durham in 1974, where he remained until 1985. This suggests that Newlands' point about the influence of Sykes on Webster in Cambridge is incorrect] but then some of the rest of the faculty were moving to a much more liberal theology. 1977 was the year of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, which was edited by John Hick, who had of course been a lecturer at Cambridge earlier, and Don Cupitt was writing all his stuff, and so on and so on, and so there was this new wave of theology. Geoffrey Lampe, the Regius Professor, whom I became very close to in the end, was also, not prepared to go as far as John Hick, or indeed Maurice Wiles across in Oxford, but certainly sympathetic to some of the issues there. For John, that was probably a reason *not* to go in that direction, I should think, whereas I, starting out very much

in the McKinnon camp, as it were, became more influenced by people like Geoffrey Lampe in the end of the day. So we kind of were moving in opposite directions in the end, and maybe that's why we didn't keep e-mailing every week, saying "What do you think about X, Y, and Z?"

RB: I know that John Webster began doing English literature, and he changed to theology. Do you know anything about why that change happened?

GN: I do not. I probably did at the time. He was a very easy person to talk to. He was a very nice student, and we talked about all sorts of things. But I honestly can't remember the content of the conversations, but it was a pleasure to supervise him.

RB: I suppose for trying to understand his early development, I would like to get at the timeframe for when he makes this transition from Methodism to what he calls "robust Calvinism."

[...]

GN: The Dean of Clare [College] was Arthur Peacocke [also Tutor and Director of Studies in Theology, 1973-84. Peacocke self-identified as a panentheist.] who was a much more liberal theologian but I imagine somebody with whom anybody could get on with pretty well, and so on. And Charlie Moule [Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge from 1951 to 1976, also Fellow of Clare College] of course was also in [Clare]. He was a great guru of evangelical Biblical studies. [Moule was a moderate rather than a conservative evangelical.] He had been in Clare for fifty years so [John] would have got to know Charlie pretty well: low-church Anglican, great figure as it were in the past.

I take it you're a Zoroastrian yourself?

RB: Oh, you can tell?

GN: Yeah. Up in flames. Good.

[...]

Of course I am both an Anglican and a Presbyterian. Sweet and dry, you know. [Laughs] So I should have been burned at the stake long ago, but I'm too wet to burn, as I say. [Laughs]

[...]

I went to Heidelberg to study Patristics, with [Hans] von Campenhausen and I got slightly fed up with systematic theology, at the arguments between Messrs McIntyre and Torrance and so on, and then after I'd been therefore for a year, actually I got into Lutheran theology in a big way, and thought, maybe I want to do systematic theology after all. So, I looked around and the choice would be between Pannenberg (who was from the Heidelberg school) or Jüngel, who seemed very interesting in Zurich. So, at this time we were married, and went to spend a semester with Jüngel, and went to lectures. But he had this *Sozietät* thing in his house at night, and great quantities of red wine and you had to drive there. It was a little bit scary, but never mind. And he spent a whole term just reading through Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Just reading them through, and commenting about, what do you think the meaning of this is, and do you think what he is thinking, and so on, and he just played with this for a whole semester, no doubt helped with a glass or two of splendid red claret or whatever. And that was typical of Jüngel. He was very much the intellectual, puzzling about issues of meaning and so on. And I had been attracted to his stuff from Heidelberg because he'd written that book *Paulus und Jesus*, which was never translated into English, sadly, and it was an attempt to bring together Barth and Bultmann, which I thought was a very creative and interesting thing to do. And I thought, well this guy clearly is saying interesting things, and bringing together different streams, and so it was. But he terrified his students. I thought it was not good, really, that he just frightened them to death, and so they did what they were told.

[...]

RB: Someone suggested to me that John Webster went to see Jüngel, and was rather disappointed by what he found.

GN: I've heard that too, yeah, that he didn't really seem to appreciate how much John had done for him, by introducing him to the English-speaking world. Jüngel understood English but wouldn't really speak it. He went to America, and I presume he had to speak English there, and he was pretty arrogant, actually, but then that gave him the drive. He could be absolutely charming in the domestic context. And his mother always used to phone, to find out if he was washing his socks, or something like that. Very interesting kind of person, really.

[end of transcript]

2. Rowan Williams

9 July 2018

RB: By way of introduction, please would you tell me something about your professional and personal relationship with John Webster?

RW: I think he first came to me for supervision in his third year as an undergraduate. If I remember rightly, he had started doing English, didn't he, and changed to doing theology, which in itself made for a sympathetic conversation. But he had asked that I supervise him for his dissertation for Part II of the theological tripos which was on Pannenberg.

[…]

I don't know if it's extant anywhere [but] I think it is an index of how already he was committed to systematic theology in a serious way, and my impression was that as he wrote on Pannenberg, he became rather disenchanted with Pannenberg, an experience which my wife also had. She was a contemporary of John's there, also doing theology.

RB: Do you know what it was about Pannenberg's theology…?

RW: I can't recall now, but my sense is that Pannenberg's attempt to find the hooking-on points of theology in a neutral historical record, [John was] not particularly sympathetic, not that John had any time for the Bultmannian dissolution of history, but he didn't think that you could take quite the short-cuts that it seemed that Pannenberg [took].

RB: So, he would have been more open to a Barthian paradigm?

RW: I think what I was watching was the steady evolution of a more Barthian paradigm. I was not entirely surprised when he settled on Jüngel as a partner for the next round.

RB: Were you involved in suggesting that to him?

RW: I don't recall that I was, no. I'm pretty sure we talked about it at some point but I don't think the idea came from me. And that must have been the late '70s, early '80s: my recollection is that I supervised John in '78-ish. Frankly, I'd have loved to supervise the Ph.D. as well, but I was a very junior soul. So, I was aware of the Barthian element fighting its way to the surface, and I think that from that point on

(that third year) John was committed to what he called "theological theology," that is, theology which defined its own parameters and methods.

RB: That's very interesting, because it's not really until the late '90s that he uses the term, "theological theology," but others have suggested to me that this really is an evolving, but lifelong, concern.

RW: Entirely right.

RB: Maybe you could say a little more about the Cambridge days, because I think that is where I'm struggling to get other information. John Webster described in his own account of his theological development his conversion from a "watery Methodism" to a "robust Calvinistic Christianity." Was that something that happened at Cambridge, or was that something that happened before he came up, do you know?

RW: I only knew him in his third year, and I know that by then he was already quite involved with the Christian Union, so I would guess it was either early in his Cambridge time, which wouldn't surprise me, or just before.

RB: Do you know what church he was part of when he was in Cambridge?

RW: I rather think he was involved with St Paul's in Hills Road, but I'm not 100% sure.

RB: That's not really a student church these days, is it?

RW: No.

RB: Was it, back in the '70s?

RW: Not very much. It was a little bit, for those who wanted something a little bit more theological than Holy Trinity, and that was before the Round Church (St Andrew the Great) was quite such a distinctive brand, let's say, though it was a strong evangelical church, without quite the ideological force that it has these days. So, I think it might have been a bit of that. And there were also those who deliberately wanted to step a little bit aside from the student churches. Now I may be confusing that slightly, but I think that when John was first ordained he had an attachment at St Paul's.

RB: Right? Because he was ordained when he was at Durham, wasn't he?

RW: Then I've got that wrong.

RB: Perhaps moving on from Cambridge [...] for me, trying to trace John Webster's theological development, it's interesting to find things where seeds are sown early on in his career. You've talked about how you saw the trend in a Barthian direction even from his undergraduate research and work on Pannenberg, and the theological theology. Were there any other things in those early days that you could see Webster's potential or the way he was heading?

RW: One of the early articles he wrote, I think, for the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, was on the theology of Scripture [This is probably, "Christology, Imitability and Ethics." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39, no. 3 (1986): 309–26.] and I remember it partly because he quoted something of mine in it and I remember reading it without realising where the quote was from and thinking, "that's an interesting quote." [laughs] And John obviously thought there was some convergence there, and I remember talking with him about it, and I have a vague recollection of walking round the gardens at St John's in Cambridge talking about the doctrine of Scripture.

RB: When would this have been?

RW: Probably the early to mid-'80s [...] I think that search for a theology of Scripture was there from quite early on.

RB: Did you see his developing theology of Scripture change as you observed and interacted with it?

RW: I don't suppose I followed it closely enough to comment in detail. It certainly broadened and to some extent stiffened as time went on, but I don't think he was ever quite the bone-headed biblicist that some of his critics would have seen him as. I think it was a very nuanced theology, very Barthian in a sense, that is, if you say that Scripture is the Word of God written, that Scripture is where you encounter the active and living God, that's different from saying it's an infallible textbook.

RB: That seems to me to be the distinction he's trying to make. He's got, on the one hand, the Protestant Reformed orthodox, and the mistake he thinks they make, reifying the text.

RW: Exactly.

RB: On the other hand, he's got the liberal tradition since Schleiermacher: like Barth, he's trying to say it's not *that*. But he develops a dissatisfaction with Barth as

well, as he moves on, does he not?

RW: Yes, and I think it's a bit to do with what fascinated me in his later years, which was the greater interest in Aquinas, and I think it's because if you really take Barth seriously—and of course, what Barth is saying is that for theology to be theology, it has to presuppose that God is God, to put it rather crudely, and what does it mean that God is God? What is the utter, self-defining, inner necessity (to use a misleading word) of the divine being? And, I may be projecting on to John some of my own concerns, so aim off for this, but I've got a feeling from what I know of John's later work that he to some extent shared my dissatisfaction with the way in which Barth can slip towards a rather voluntaristic account of that: God is whatever God decides to be, and that way, Jenson lies.

RB: Or Bruce McCormack?

RW: Or Bruce McCormack. And, you know, John didn't have much truck with that reading of Barth, but I think could see where you needed a bit more than Barth provides to shore up a sense of the *aseitas* of God.

RB: Do you think that's what undergirds his *ressourcement* project?

RW: Absolutely.

RB: Going back to Aquinas, Augustine, Owen….

RW: John Owen. Yes.

RB: […and] the reassessment of the seventeenth-century Reformed writers?

RW: I think so, yes. I think he's asking the question: granted that we have now learned something from Barth, and we've learned perhaps how not to do it, then it's time to look back beyond Barth and say, well, what do we need to recover to make that learning a little bit more solidly grounded.

RB: It is a fascinating project, the way he does that. […] Maybe we could go back from Cambridge to Oxford. […] It would be helpful for me if you could share a little bit about the Lady Margaret professorship, because I realise there's a canon role in the cathedral […] and I'd love to know how you think John Webster fitted in the Oxford culture in that particular job?

RW: One of the unique things about the Oxford faculty is that the historic chairs were practically all annexed to canonries of Christ Church. So Christ Church, when it

was refounded by Henry VIII, was in effect founded as a teaching cathedral, plugged into the university. [...] One of the things that I valued certainly in my time was that I found myself saying matins each morning with two people with very different theologies, from each other and from myself, and that was very good for all of us, I think.

RB: So you were in matins every morning? That was part of it?

RW: Well, in those days, the expectation was pretty strict, that the chapter came to matins every morning, evensong when they could, every canon had to do a term of residence from time to time, that is, a week of being responsible for everything that happened in the cathedral, which would entail preaching on the Sunday, being at evensong every day, and I think normally, celebrating Holy Communion at least once in that week.

RB: And that happened once a term? One term every year? It's quite a heavy set of responsibilities, isn't it?

RW: It is, but that's what being residentiary canon in a cathedral means: you have a week or sometimes more of "residence," in which you're there, you're the duty officer for that week, and that usually came round (let me see, how many others were there? about six, so) once every couple of months. And yes, it was quite a heavy responsibility, and you had the responsibility of getting somebody else to cover if you couldn't do it and so on, and some of us in the chapter tried to make sure that we had residences in vacation rather than in term because it could be quite a heavy burden in term. So, being a canon meant that you were expected daily in the cathedral, expected to preach regularly in the cathedral, whether or not you are in residence, and there are a whole of other rather nebulous things with the cathedral's general outreach, so you might be called on to take part in a civic service or something like that, and then on top of that there would be the committees and the responsibilities of the college, of Christ Church.

RB: Administrative, and so on?

RW: Administrative, yes. So, in my time, I remember sitting on one of the finance committees in college, and the livings committee of course, which appointed to parishes, one or two working parties to do with the fabric of the cathedral.

RB: As far as you know, would it have been a role that John Webster would have

thrived in? Was it something that suited his temperament or his gifting?

RW: I'm not sure that it was, entirely.

RB: Why was that?

RW: John was a profoundly ecclesial theologian, but one of the least 'churchy' of people.

RB: What's the distinction?

RW: An all-important one. I mean, he was very, very conscious of theologising for the Body of Christ, if you like, and in the Body of Christ, and very conscious of being a theologian who was also a pastor and a preacher. I think to cope with the cathedral you have to have perhaps a bit more enthusiasm that I suspect John did for the ins and outs of liturgy, managing the stormy emotional weather of the choir, you know, all of that. This is entirely impressionistic, but for what it's worth the impression is that wasn't John's idea of a good time.

RB: It's interesting, because one of the more mysterious aspects of John's career [...] is why he moved to Scotland, the various push and pull factors.

RW: I would venture a guess that it's a mixture of two things: one would be that Christ Church demands a lot, and I think you probably have to actively love the cathedral to get on with that. The other thing is that of course the administrative and research structure of Oxford was then (it's a bit less so now, but it certainly was then) chaotically diffuse. A lot of arguably unnecessary extra work is created, not having a central structure that's very effective, at least in my time, and I used to find that very frustrating in my years in the chair.

RB: And the way that systematic theology is, or was, taught in Oxford [...] would that have frustrated [him]?

RW: I think it might have.

RB: Did he see something attractive in Scotland?

RW: I think he very understandably thought he'd have more interlocutors in Scotland, you know, people who knew what he was on about.

RB: Particularly in Aberdeen?

RW: Particularly in Aberdeen. I don't think in Oxford at that time there would have

been many. Keith Ward, who was in the Regius chair at the time. A wonderful man, Keith.

RB: Very different.

RW: Very different. A wonderful colleague but as different as could be. Chalk and cheese.

RB: Were you still in personal friendship with John Webster in the Oxford years?

RW: Yes, and we kept up a bit. We met from time to time to chat. I read a certain amount of what he wrote and valued it. I don't think we saw each other very regularly. As I say, he'd also been an undergraduate contemporary of my wife, and they had been friends, so we had one of those friendships you sort of pick up rather quickly when you meet, but don't give a great deal of energy to preserving because it sort of looks after itself.

RB: [...] It's difficult to read into factors like the breakdown of his marriage, but it's been quite hard to find those who have known him closely [...]

RW: There was a side of him which was the sort of taciturn Yorkshireman, whose habitual bluntness just set a very clear limit, and his not suffering fools gladly, and that was how he presented himself. That was how he presented, that's how he related, so he could be great fun to be with, but he didn't take prisoners. [laughs]

[...]

The sense of obedience in theology was clearly so important to John. You don't theologise because you have some bright ideas, you theologise because you have to. You are always responding.

[...]

RB: As you look at his work, what do you think are the most significant aspects of the legacy that John Webster has left for the church and the academy?

RW: Certainly as far as English-speaking theology goes, it's the next stage after the absorption of Barth in the 1970s in English theology—the belated absorption of Barth—and in British terms (I couldn't say directly about the States) in a sense John focuses the question, so where do you go after Barth? You can go in the Jenson, McCormack direction, or indeed I'd say the Jüngel direction, and I'm not quite sure what John would have said about Jüngel at the end of his life, you can go in that di-

rection. In other words you can emphasise what I call the voluntaristic side of it, or, you can say a theological theology explores what you have to saying in order to be talking about God at all, which is a question certainly about God's self-declaration in revelation. It's also a question about what makes talk about God recognisable as talk about God, and that's where John is quarrying back *behind* Barth, saying, in a very important way, and not just like Jenson going back to a form of the Patristic tradition as read through a slightly idiosyncratic lens, but to a much more metaphysically-interested and alert approach. That's his importance, I think, that he really does hold those two things together: a fundamental metaphysical concern about how God-talk is recognisable as such.

RB: Do you think, personally, that he got Barth right?

RW: Broadly, yes. Or at least, I think he got hold of that end of Barth which makes most sense, put it that way. Because Barth, always a preacher, will let language run in some places in a way which can make you think, *hmmm*. [laughs] And, some watching Barth run in that direction have run after him and cheerfully leapt off a cliff, where Barth neatly swerves round just by the cliff edge. [laughs]

[...]

RB: Where do you think John Webster's work might have gone if he had lived? What kind of areas would we have seen him addressing in systematic theology that he hadn't come to?

RW: Hard to say. I would have liked to hear him at greater length, so to speak, on Christology and Trinitarian theology. He produced some brief but very interesting thoughts on Christology. There's a couple of articles of theses on Christology which are very good and very suggestive but [*indistinct*] more. And on Trinitarian theology, I'm not sure he ever wrote anything very programmatic about this, although I may be wrong about that. [...] I think what he had done was really to roll the pitch very thoroughly about method and the doctrine of revelation and he'd begun to do this very interesting ground-clearing work on what I'm calling the metaphysical or programmatic aspects of talk about God, so it would have been good to hear then how that fully fleshed out.

RB: In terms of Christology, what particular things would you have hoped to see him flesh out?

RW: I would have liked to see him do a good contemporary re-working of Calvin's Christology, which to me is an extremely fertile and interesting field. I've just finished a book on Christology myself which is dedicated to John's memory, or rather to John Webster and Austin Farrer, in memory of Austin Farrer's fiftieth obit anniversary, and in memory of John Webster. And I've touched on his theses on Christology in that. […]

John was always very scathing about what I think he would have regarded as making God too pathetic, making God a sort of poignant tragic hero, who suffers intensely.

RB: A sort of Moltmannian approach?

RW: Yes. And against that he marshals the full Barthian artillery of the liberty and the majesty of God. And I have a lot of sympathy with that, having been much more sympathetic to Moltmann when I was teaching John—*much* more—but I've increasingly come to see that as a dead end.

RB: Wasn't it Barth who said to Moltmann, "Your God is a pauper."

RW: Yes. That is the problem, I think. A misreading of what divine impassibility means, as if it were a lack, not an abundance. "Poor old God, he can't feel the way we do." So he has to go through this extraordinary surgical procedure of acquiring feelings, in the incarnation. And that's the point at which John would habitually say, "I'm off for a pint." [laughs]

[…]

That was his strength and his weakness in a sense, and if there was a weakness I suppose I'd find it in the *extreme* robustness, directness of argument, which doesn't leave much room. He loves writing theses.

RB: So it's a methodological weakness?

RW: Stylistic, rather, because the argument's there. It's just that the thesis, in the old-fashioned sense, is very much John's favoured mode: you *state* this is how it is, putting your card on the table and say, right, now then, argue!

[…]

RB: What people often say in terms of their criticism is that John Webster situates theology generally, and Scripture particularly, 20,000 feet off the ground, and it makes it very hard for any kind of dialogue with people who are to the left of him,

let's say on Scripture, who want to say to him: what about this *concrete* issue, when you're up there in the clouds?

RW: Yes, I know what that criticism is about, I suppose, but I think he would again say, look, there's got to be a proper, what I called earlier, "rolling the pitch." What sort of thing are we talking about? What's the nature of this subject? And he might well have said, as implicitly Barth is saying, look, the best way of addressing concrete issues is making sure you've got your hinterland straight, because if you go out into that tangle of specific questions—political, ethical, ecclesiological questions—without…

RB: "Rolling the pitch," as you say?

RW: Rolling the pitch… then don't come crying to me! [laughs] Because you're on your own! Get your map clear, and you can travel.

RB: Thanks very much. That's a great metaphor. […]

RW: I think that's how he thought about it. And going back to what I was saying about the stylistic, I think that's what I called a strength and a weakness because, it's a strength because it's lucid, to a degree, and it's also hard to argue with, but that would be John's frustration. He would say, it's there in clear terms *so that* you can argue with it. Don't just wriggle around saying that feels a bit awkward! Just tell me what's wrong with that! And that could be maddening, but it could also be—I think many of his students found—really generative. It's a way of doing theology. It's, on the whole, it's not mine, but I respect and admire John, the way he did that, and read him with delight, often.

RB: Thank you very much indeed. I've much appreciated your time this morning.

[end of transcript]

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